

De-Mystifying Fandom: An Ethnography of the World of *Supernatural* Fangirls

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Introduction

There are very few things quite like being surrounded by two thousand people who all love exactly the same thing that you love. Whether it is Durkheim's collective effervescence or Edith Turner's *communitas* or something else altogether, it is hard to contest the fact that there's a certain sort of overwhelming energy that captures you, bonding you closer to the thing being loved and to each other. Now imagine you do not have to make an expensive pilgrimage to a sacred space to feel this; you can experience this feeling online, whenever you want. This is the daily experience of thousands of fans of any number of television shows today. We have come so far from *Star Trek* zines (see *The Influence of Star Trek on Television, Film, and Culture*, 2008; *Living with Star Trek: American History and the Star Trek Universe*, 2007, and Constance Penley's article in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, 1994 for accounts of the earliest "modern" fandom) and only one convention a year – Comic Con. Although cult TV and its fanatic devotees are nothing new, the past decade has certainly redefined what it means to be a fan. With the development of the internet and the increasing savvy of the enthusiastic young person, fan communities (or *fandoms*, as it is said)¹ have been able to emerge in a number of new and innovative forms.

A particularly interesting instance of this new wave of fandom comes out of the community surrounding Eric Kripke's *Supernatural*, which has aired on the CW² – much to everyone's surprise – since 2005. The show follows Sam and Dean Winchester, beginning a search for their father John, and evolving into a story about free will against destiny, stopping the apocalypse as it is told in the book of Revelations, and going up against angels, demons, monsters, ghosts, and all kinds of things that go bump in the night. The show follows a generally

¹ Italicized terms are listed and defined in Appendix A.

² The CW, formerly the WB, is a channel owned by Warner Brothers and CBS. For more information see <http://www.cwtv.com/thecw/about-the-cw/>.

Judeo-Christian mythology, with plenty of creative liberties.³ Coming up on ten seasons, this show began as something simple and small: hardly any budget, just another episodic monster fighting show, written off as a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* knockoff. Even the cast and crew never expected the show to remain on the air past season one, let alone season ten. But something about this show inspires extreme dedication, evidenced by accounts that the *Supernatural* fandom (or SPNfamily, or Wayward Sons, as they are sometimes called) rarely loses an online poll,⁴ and has caused *Supernatural* to win several People's Choice Awards despite little critical acclaim from other entities.⁵ Because of this and my own personal involvement and familiarity with this community, the *Supernatural* fandom will be the primary focus of this study.

A paper or book on fandom is hardly an interesting or new idea. In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), Henry Jenkins writes about the way fans use fandom to assert their control over interpretations of storylines. Rhiannon Bury's *Cyberspaces of their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (1995) is the first work to discuss fandom and gender. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (2013) by Mark Duffett offers a comprehensive look into fandom as both an object and a field of study. Most recently, Katherine Larsen and Lynn S. Zubernis provide a personal look into the *Supernatural* fandom in *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls* (2013). Collections of scholarly essays such as *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* (2012) celebrate fandom while touching on many key issues of

³ For a highly narrativized summary of the show through its ninth season, see Appendix B.

⁴ Carina Adly MacKenzie, "Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki Get Matchy at People's Choice Awards 2013: 'Supernatural' Snags Favorite Sci-Fi Fantasy Show Award," *Zap2it*, 2013, http://www.zap2it.com/blogs/jensen_ackles_and_jared_padalecki_get_matchy_at_peoples_choice_awards_2013_supernatural_snags_favori-2013-01.

⁵ "Supernatural - Awards," *IMDB*, n.d., http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/awards?ref_=tt_awd.

fandom: identity, gender, power, sexuality, intertextuality, and fantasy. It is my hope that this thesis will continue this work.⁶

Conversely, the work *Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures: A Psychological and Behavioral Analysis* (2008) features a collection of essays which wholly demonize fandoms. Studies like this convolute the division between fanaticism – obsessive, quasi-psychotic fixation – and fandom – passionate enthusiasm and admiration. They misinterpret the devotional acts of fandom, which tend to be unconventional, overwhelming, spastic, and often erotic, to be dangerous as a result of this exuberance. Unfortunately, this opinion of fandom, even of nerds and geeks in general, contributes to feelings of secrecy and shame about fandom-related enthusiasm. As Larsen and Zubernis write, “While the vast majority of fans remain sane in the midst of passion, the tendency to characterize fans – especially female fans – as ‘rabid,’ ‘demented,’ ‘obsessed’ stalkers or just plain ‘batshit crazy’ persists. Even the fans themselves can’t quite decide whether to scream their glee about fandom from the rooftops, apologize for it, or just pretend they’re not fans at all.”⁷ This reputation about fandom enacts itself in a self-fulfilling cycle – “normal” people do not understand the unbridled ecstasy of fans, which causes fans to encourage secrecy, which allows non-fans to understand even less. In no way am I claiming that fans participate in fandom for anything but their own joy – mainstream approval is not the goal. However, this reputation can be limiting for people interesting in getting

⁶ For more, see Roger C. Aden, who discusses the significance of places and spaces in the lives of fans in *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages* (1992). Sheenagh Pugh’s *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (2005) provides a comprehensive analysis into fanfiction, arguably the first flag indicating a fandom’s existence. In *Who are you People?: A Personal Journey into the Heart of Fanatical Passion in America* (2006), Shari Caudron uses psychoanalysis to understand fans and their influence on the larger culture. Collections of general essays include *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992), *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity* (1998), *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007), and *Buffy and Angel Conquer the Internet: Essays on Online Fandom* (2009).

⁷ Katherine Larsen and Lynn S. Zubernis, *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls* (Iowa City, Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2013), 5.

into fandom but who fail to do so because of strict outsider/insider boundaries, or fear of a negatively stigmatized label. Because of this, I believe this ethnography of fandom is essential to even the playing field and shedding some light on what fans do and why they do them.

Even as a nearly-graduated student in folk religion – a hybrid major comprised of Anthropology, Folklore, and Religious Studies courses – it would be fruitless to argue that a certain fandom qualifies as a folk group or a certain fandom qualifies as a religious community. I do not wish to assert that fandom acts as a true religion of the fans (however disputed what defines a “true religion” remains); for some it may and for some it may not, and I do not feel as though it is my place to identify it as such for these individuals. However, the framework of religion and mysticism provides a helpful model for thinking about and working through fandom, and is especially relevant in the *Supernatural* fandom, considering the religious themes of the show itself and therefore the resulting fanworks. I think it would be more interesting and worthwhile to consider the role of fandom in the lives of the fans. What does it mean about a person to devote themselves, not just to the subject itself, but even further that it arouses the need to join with likeminded others? What is it about these people and this show that insists on a love that is so much more than casual? I would like to argue that the life of a fan is very much like the life of a mystic.

The first modern scholarly definition of mysticism was given by William James, published in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). This work was closely followed by Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism: a Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) and *The Essentials of Mysticism* (1920). Underhill’s two works, in direct opposition to the work of James, sparked a debate about the nature of mystical experience which has continued to the present day. While James argues that mystical experience is something

passively received from a power outside of oneself, Underhill asserts that mysticism must be practiced in daily life, in a way that permeates all actions.⁸ This debated dichotomy between mystical experience and other experience was deepened by Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) which introduced the idea of the Self/Numinous, penetrated by the *mysterium tremendum*, an intense and possibly dangerous personal breach into the ineffable. Otto's ideas were taken even further by Robert Hertz' *Death and the Right Hand* (1960), when he wrote about the binary between the sacred and the profane. Religion and mysticism thus far had been delineated to a strictly Othering experience (even in the context of Western Christianity, which was the primary focus of almost all of these scholars). W.T. Stace published *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1961), attempting to counteract some of the traditional claims about what he calls the "universal core of mystical experience" through a strictly logical approach. His differentiation between introvertive and extrovertive mysticism will be important to my argument. Further, Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (1995) and Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (2002) work to question the issues of gender as it pertains to both the history of mysticism and the history of its academic study. Finally, William Harmless's *Mystics* (2007) gives an excellent historical overview of many global mystical practitioners. This review illustrates the fundamentally disagreed upon definition of mysticism, as well as mysticism's inherent adaptability as a framework for understanding religious action. Because of this, mysticism allows itself to be academically lent to other fields – such as fandom studies – in order to better understand their functions.

⁸ A full explanation of the contention between these two scholars can be found from Lynn Bridgers, "The Head and The Heart: William James and Evelyn Undershill on Mysticism," *William James Studies*, 9 (2012).

However heretical it may be to claim, fandom operates in a number of similar ways to religion in its broadest sense, many of which will be detailed in this thesis. Most importantly, it serves as a vehicle for a connection to something outside of the self, which cannot be accessed by normal means. Just as mystics need more than simple prayer or scripture, members of the fandom need much more than just simply watching the show. And just as mystics turn to mysticism to unite themselves with their god or achieve their own form of nirvana, fans turn to fandom to unite themselves with the story.

Without disregarding the potential outreaching of the divine to the individual, the practices of mysticism and mystical experience correlate quite well with the existence of a certain psychology and personality type. On the most basic level, the motivation for any action is desire. George Drazenovich writes, “Research is pointing to the conclusion that the mystical quest has profound relevance for achieving meaning and purpose in life... mystical experience is an integral aspect of the human person and the recovery of the mystical tradition will fill a much-needed void in society.”⁹ In Drazenovich’s view, the primary goal of mysticism is unity with the divine, which will assist practitioners in finding meaning in life. Mercedes Arriaga Flórez notes that mystical experience requires a, “deep interior dimension and a strong sense of transcendence, things perhaps more necessary when there is no recognized superior divinity.”¹⁰ Further, Drazenovich asserts that, “A society that denies the mystical, and lacks a prophetic religion that insists on the primary role of the mystical within the psyche, will fall into various forms of pathological pseudo-mysticism.”¹¹ These scholars suggest that some aspect of the

⁹ George Drazenovich and Celia Kourie, “Mysticism and Mental Health: A Critical Dialogue,” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 17, no. 2 (August 2010), 7.

¹⁰ Mercedes Arriaga Flórez, “Body Mystique, Mystic Bodies,” *Feminist Theology* 19, no. 3 (April 2011), 225.

¹¹ Drazenovich and Kourie, “Mysticism and Mental Health: A Critical Dialogue”, 7.

human psyche needs a deeper connection with some sort of power outside themselves. While in mysticism this is some sort of spiritual enlightenment or divinity, fandom seeks these connections in different ways.

While the mystic sends prayers, meditations, blood, or tears to their god, the fan sends fic, art, songs, videos, anything to the internet. I imagine fandom as a carousel, or a merry-go-round. Fans are all standing around it, pushing, pulsing, and keeping the carousel spinning. This model allows for a few observations. Firstly, the idea of fandom has a semiotic nature. Like the sign, fandom is not solely signifier or signified – it is not just the fans, spinning the carousel; it is not just the source material, the carousel sitting alone. Fandom needs both parts to *be* fandom. Secondly, this model has important implications about fandom as a community. In theory according to this model, one person alone could be the fandom, just like the solitary mystic. All it takes is source material to exist and one person to push it, but just like spinning a carousel alone on a playground, eventually the solitary player will get bored and move on. The real fun comes when there are more people pushing the carousel around; more people pushing leads to faster and faster spinning. The more people that are involved in a fandom, the more creativity offered into the fandom, the more other fans grab that material and keep creating. Thirdly, this model contrasts spatially with the mysticism model. Instead of a mystic sending energy *up* to their god (however one imagines the space of their heaven, their god must ultimately be above themselves, or there would be no point in venerating them), fans send their energy *towards the center*. Given fans accelerating the carousel around and the force of this acceleration directing towards the center (even my limited knowledge of physics can attest to this), the question of what lies at the center remains.

Just like any model, there are key similarities and differences between mysticism and fandom. Unlike mysticism, fandom is not all-consuming; it is a facet of one's identity, which can be consuming depending on the individual. Jess Hollenback notes that struggle between the life of mystical recollection and normal everyday life is dealt with by all mystics.¹² Conversely, Scholar Mia Lövheim notes that the individual's online identity is simultaneous to their offline identity, not a different thing entirely, but something entangled.¹³ Additionally, fans do not seek union with any particular divinity, in the traditional sense, as mystics do. The union they are interested in is with the story itself.

This thesis has a number of aims. First, and definitely most important, my goal is to bring to light the depth and complexity of fandom. The whole package is so much bigger and important than just writing porn, and it and these people deserves to be treated seriously, just as much as any other community. The second thing this thesis aims to do is explore some of the practices and interests of the fandom, which has developed unique tropes and motifs. The last goal of this thesis is to investigate some of their possible meanings for the lives of the people in the fandom. In order to do this, this thesis is split into three sections – Spaces, Practitioners, and Practices, which will comprehensively introduce the reader to what being a member of fandom is like. In Spaces, I will cover the places where the *Supernatural* fandom exists as understood from three years of participant observation, both in the online environment and where they congregate in “real” life. In Practitioners, I analyze the typical fan, based on survey results as well as input from members of the community, and what draws them to fandom and the show in particular.

¹² Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 114.

¹³ Mia Lövheim, “Identity,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 50.

Finally, Practices will delineate the various ways in which fans express their affinity for the show, and their relations to various mystical practices.

These sections will use a variety of methodologies to analyze the experience of fandom. Because fandom occupies such an unusual and multifaceted plane of existence, an interdisciplinary approach is absolutely necessary. In addition to using information gained from my three years of extensive field work and surveying, my approaches range from contemporary to medieval mysticism, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, pilgrimage theory, television and critical media theory, and ritual and belief theory. I will be making comparisons spanning religiosity across all manner of time and space. Rather than showing how fandom relates to one specific mode of mystical practice, fandom functions in the same way as mysticism *generally*, in that it unites the practitioner with something outside of itself. Therefore, any number of mystical practices can be applied as a model, depending on what will make this comparison most clear. Fandom manifests itself in such a variety of ways of individual experiences that choosing any one approach would be reductive. Instead, I hope to synthesize these approaches in order to show that fandom is a complex entity with a number of particular functions. These functions work together to join fans with the story and each other.

Section One – Spaces

If you have never loved something so fervently that you have been moved to tears or ecstasy because of it, fandom will be a practice quite foreign to you. In loving a show – or movie, band, book, or something else entirely – and connecting with others who feel the same, fans join with both the object of their fascination and each other passionately and enthusiastically. The result is an outpouring of creation and energy which can accomplish amazing things. But before digging into the minutiae of what it means to *be* in a fandom, it is essential to discuss where exactly fandom presides. This section will contain an extensive description of the two main areas of congregation for fandom – online and in person, at conventions. These spaces lay the foundations for the form fandom itself takes. These descriptions are based off of my own extensive field exposure to this community. My participant observation for this group has lasted approximately three years and is ongoing, because I am personally heavily involved and invested in this community and type of activity. I will stress that there is an amount of variance in the individual's personal experience, in terms of the exact content they are exposed to as well as the personal relationships they make.

Up until recently, fandom studies required little to no special adaptation in regards to the ethnographic methodology used to approach the study. These communities could be studied just as any other group bound by geographical location or common interest. As we move further into the twenty-first century and adapt to new technology, fandom activity manifests itself in new forms which the modern ethnographer must evolve to meet. It is tempting to treat online, intextualized communities as an archive of community, but that fails to recognize the dynamic human interactions that happen in real time across the globe, as fast as a computer can fire its synapses. Intextualized online fan communities are so much more than their texts – posts on

tumblr, tweets with embedded links, responses from producers, shows (canon, fanon) – all of it is intertwined in a way which demands careful ethnographic analysis. In an online, new-media environment where texts are so alive, ethnographers must adapt traditional methodological approaches so they can treat the intextualized field as a dynamic community of collected individuals.

Before delving too deeply into an adapted methodology, “intextualized online fan communities” must first be defined, because this will stand in for traditional notions of “the field.” This archaic notion of the field, summarized by Ulf Hannerz, involves the geographic location of a primitive society where the anthropologist will live among a people, learn the savage tongue, and return home afterwards.¹⁴ These communities refuse to fit into that category. Certainly these communities qualify more as *global assemblages*, defined by Collier and Ong to be, “sites for the formation and reformation of... anthropological problems. They are domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention.”¹⁵ Online communities are much better conceptualized by this broader definition of field.

There is one key difference which defines the need for adapting the traditional methodology, and specifically the need for participant observation: online communities are intextualized. The community primarily exists in textual environment, and all communication is achieved through text. The temptation here is that because these online communities exist through texts to be read, they should be analyzed as though they were an archive. This would be

¹⁴ U Hannerz, “Being There... and There... and There! Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography,” in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, vol. 4 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 359.

¹⁵ SJ Collier and A Ong, “Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems,” in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 4.

a fatal mistake. As Nicholas Dirks writes, “The archive is constituted as the only space that is free of context, argument, ideology – indeed history itself.”¹⁶ Intextualized communities are the opposite of that. In an offline community, texts are concrete and (mostly) unchangeable; however, the texts of online communities compose events and exist as ongoing entities. These texts, as a result of their recursivity, are dynamic and alive, which means they need to be analyzed as conversations (conversations where individuals can pause and compose their responses) rather than completed texts. Even more so, they must be treated as conversations which can simultaneously go in any number of directions. An individual can post something and incite ten different responses to the same comment, and continue in conversation with all of them. Texts as they exist in an online contexts are constantly evolving and inviting more conversation.

The effect on the ethnographer is that rapport must be built actively. There is no proximity advantage between the ethnographer and the members of an online community. In an offline community, a person may volunteer to house you, show you your way when you are lost, or comment on something you both can observe, like the weather or the view. This is lost online unless the ethnographer initiates. All rapport must be the result of the ethnographer reaching out to members of the community and initiating conversation. Gerald Berreman writes, “Rapport establishment is largely a manner of threading among them so as to win admittance to the back region of the subject’s performance without alienating them.”¹⁷ In the case of online fan communities, the only way to establish rapport is to be extremely, authentically invested in the

¹⁶ NB Dirks, “Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History,” in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*, ed. Brian Keith Axel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 48.

¹⁷ Gerald Berreman, “Behind Many Masks: Ethnography and Impression Management,” in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, ed. Antonius CGM Robben and Jeffrey A Sluka, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 147.

thing that the community centers around, because that is all you have to make conversation about.

Further, because there are essentially no bars to joining an online community other than an intense interest in a subject, there is nothing to stop the ethnographer from authentically joining. The community is not only accessible to all interested parties, but also the ethnographer – if the ethnographer is willing to *become* an interested party. Judith Stacey notes that ethnography can be problematic due to the “situations of inauthenticity, dissimilitude, and potential, perhaps inevitable betrayal, situations that [she now believes] are inherent to the field work method.”¹⁸ In the case of online fan communities, it would be impossible to inauthentically join – going through the motions and watching and reading, but not enjoying any of it. These communities are fueled by passion; they don’t waste time trying to argue the value of their interests with people who don’t share them and they operate on the assumption that anyone trying to connect has the same base knowledge of and excitement about the subject. Therefore an incomplete or disinterested knowledge would be sufficient to work one’s way into the community. As Kirin Narayan notes, this shouldn’t, “imply that an authentic insider’s perspective is possible, and that this can unproblematically represent the associated group. This leads us to underplay the ways in which people born within a society can be simultaneously both insiders and outsiders.”¹⁹ However, it will give the ethnographer an authentic *experience*, which is very important in this context for producing an ethnography of such a faceted and individualized community. In an online community, the content all individuals are exposed to is unique to the individual; there are commonalities among them, but no two individuals have the

¹⁸ Judith Stacey, “Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 11, no. 1 (1988), 23.

¹⁹ Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” in *Situated Live: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Louise Lamphere, Helena Ragone, and Patricia Zavella (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 31.

exact same experience in the community. If the ethnographer incorporates being a member of the community into their own identity, their authentic personal experience of being in the group will allow them to more empathetically and carefully compose the knowledge into something academic.

Implicit in these discussions is the essential notion of participant observation. The differences between online and offline communities, especially for an ethnographer unfamiliar with the online environment, make participant observation the most important tool they have. Without participant observation, the ethnographer cannot hope to establish rapport and their field notes will be useless. Carol Delaney writes, “Participant observation can be a method finely honed for our task, which is to *bear witness* to the variety of ways of being human... Learning a culture is not just a cognitive, scientific activity.”²⁰ Participant observation is what makes the texts come alive; it allows you to read between the lines and find the humans beneath the words. The significance of texts becomes understood through long-term immersion and exposure. Further, it takes some time for the ethnographer to understand the way information and texts circulate around the online community. The activity patterns and the community’s tendency to comment on itself is not going to be immediately apparent through an initial linear observation.

What participant observation actually looks like depends greatly on the online community that the ethnographer is looking to study. Certainly it draws on Ulf Hannerz’ notion of “polymorphous engagements,” which he defines as, “interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, but also doing fieldwork by telephone and email, collecting data eclectically in many different ways from a disparate array of sources, attending carefully to popular culture, and reading newspapers and official documents. Skills of synthesis may become

²⁰ Carol Delaney, “Participant-Observation: The Razor’s Edge,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 13 (1988), 293.

more important than ever.”²¹ The ethnographer must wrap themselves in the community’s identity until it becomes a part of their own identity. The idea is to let the source material permeate you, because that is what it has done to the people in the community. Find the themes; find the loss, find the growth, find the romance, find what speaks to the human condition.

The problem with doing an ethnography on such a non-linear and entangled community such as an online fan community is straightening it out into a linear text which the ethnographer produces. Even more of a problem, the ethnographer must convert old-school methodology to new-media communities, but then must re-convert data into old-school terminology in order for the information produced to be understood by academics. These transformations result in a work that is rigorous and scientific, but hopefully reflects the empathetic ethnographer whose identity has been affected by their fieldwork. This discussion of the adaptation of traditional ethnographic methodology into methods which can be used to analyze online fandom illustrates the way in which participant observation is the most necessary and fruitful tool for interpreting fandom. Although the individual’s experience in fandom will vary greatly from person to person in terms of particular content, the general experience has patterns which can be seen and described through participant observation.

My own position of involvement and membership in the *Supernatural* fandom must be acknowledged. It gives me the authority to assert that my descriptions based on participant observation are true and valid, at the very least in my own experience. In addition, it reveals my personal stake in doing this project. My personal experiences with shame and sexism in relation to fandom as well as the similar experiences of friends causes me to pursue this correction of perception regarding our identity.

²¹ Hannerz, “Being There... and There... and There! Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography”, 366.

“THE FIELD”

When examining the *Supernatural* fandom, or any fandom, for that matter, it is essential to delineate the places and spaces where members congregate. Popular Culture scholar Purnima Mankekar writes, “The analysis of television cannot be reduced to the text on the screen, but instead must extend to the spaces occupied by television in the daily lives and practices of viewers.”²² In the twenty-first century, these spaces are primarily digital, and this digital “field” shapes the mediums in which fans create fandom. For the *Supernatural* fandom, the dominant occupied space is the popular blogging platform, Tumblr.com. The fandom centers on tumblr. Although there are members of fandom on other websites – twitter.com, reddit.com, livejournal.com, facebook.com – the numbers that congregate in those spaces are far less, and often simultaneously are tumblr users. Tumblr acts as a focalizing center which creates a space for fandom, much like a meditation center, temple, or monastery would create a space for mystical practices. Because the material culture for fandom stems from tumblr and because of its status as the primary location of fellowship, I must draw a description of the functions of tumblr in order to frame the discussion of the fandom and what they do there. This description is absolutely necessary, to allow an exploration of this world from within its discourse and language. These forms of posts dictate the types of fandom expression that can be made. They allow for the continuation of practices that have been around for more than a century (it is generally agreed that the following around Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series was the first fandom – creating “pastiche”, stories about the characters written in the style of the author, which was arguably the first fanfiction²³) as well as innovation for new forms.

²² Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Post-Colonial India*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

²³ See http://archive.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-05/pl_brown, <http://theoakwheel.wordpress.com/2014/07/31/fandom-and-fanfiction/>, <https://suite.io/jo-harrington/5pgd241>.

Every user generates a blog (or blogs) with a unique URL, which also functions as a username. This gives them the ability to make original posts, repost (*reblog*) posts to their own blogs with credit to the original poster (*OP*), or *like* posts. For every blogger who likes or reblogs your post, the post gets one note – the more notes something has, the more popular it is and the more people who have seen your content. Posts that are reblogged by users that you follow are conglomerated into single feed, called the *Dashboard* (often abbreviated as *dash*). Text posts are usually sarcastic or self-deprecating one-liners (called *text posts*) or vents relating to the blogger's real life (*personal posts*) or rather long essays about something the blogger is passionate about (generally just called *posts*; in fandom, *meta*). Sometimes *audio posts* can be used to make jokes in the accompanying text more humorous, or they might be actual music. Quote posts (*quotes*) and *chat posts* are basically shorter text posts, but with different formatting emphasis. Photo posts can either be photography, pictures of your own face (*selfies*), moving pictures of scenes from videos in Graphic Interchange Format (.gif filetypes, called *gifs*) or photoshopped graphics featuring characters, celebrities, textures, and text (*edits*). Photo posts can also contain more than one picture, set in various layouts (*photosets*) or more than one gif (*gifsets*). There are video posts (*videos*), hosted through youtube or tumblr itself.

Very rarely do bloggers communicate in any sort of face-to-face means – nearly all communication is through text. It is also worthwhile to note that this has resulted in a very specific non-aural dialect, in which capitalization, punctuation and other forms of emphasis (those easily supported by the text post platform – bold, italics, strikethrough, ordered lists, numbered lists, and the blockquote) all have a little more power than they do in other writing. Additionally, the way we use language on tumblr is distinctly different from other popular social media - such as imgur, reddit, and especially facebook – and it has to do directly with the type of

typing allowed by the platform. For example, text posts are almost always written with no capitalization or punctuation at all, which can be likened to a deadpan, run-on sentence. Almost all text-posts are sarcastic, and can either be light-hearted or a little more scathing - either puns, jokes, or social commentary. In contrast to this, serious social justice posts, meta, and occasionally personal posts are generally written just as formally as an essay, with proper punctuation and capitalization. Occasionally, lazy spelling and “chatspeak” are used – but nearly always ironically. Tumblr also has a tagging system similar to what twitter and Instagram (and now, even facebook) calls “the hashtag”, but tumblr users just call it *tagging*, or *the tags*. Writing something in the tags can be used both for organization and commentary on the post. These uses for the tagging system allow for a systematic way to examine reception of posts. Because opinions are often put in the tags, it’s easy to tell how users feel about content, based on the general trend of tags on a particular post. It would be impossible to sum up all the idiosyncrasies of the language – it is surprisingly nuanced for a group of people who prefer to never take off their pajamas – but in short, all adherences (or non-adherences) to the standard rules of grammar are deliberate, and should not be taken at face value but interpreted.

Therefore, tumblr presents a unique space for fandom, in that individuals have a fairly high level of control over the content that they are exposed to. This is constructed by means of three things: the dash, browser extensions, and the note system. The nature of the dash as a conglomerate of posts from the users the individual follows means that the individual doesn’t have to see anything irrelevant to their interests. They can simply unfollow anyone who posts things they disagree with. Browser extensions such as Xkit or Tumblr Savior (often abbreviated as *ts*, as in [tag to be blocked] *for ts*) interact with the tag system, so depending on what users tag a certain character or fandom, the extensions can hide those posts from the user’s dash by

imputing tags to block in the *blacklist*. These two factors – unfollowing and blacklisting – are directly controllable by the user. Even further, the notes system dictates what content you are more likely to see. When a post is popular (has more notes), a user is more likely to see it, because there is a greater chance that someone they follow will have reblogged it. This means that popular posts – posts where more users agree or support the content – are more likely to be reblogged, continuing their popularity and (providing qualitative data for opinions held by the fandom). The result of these three factors means that the individual experience in the *Supernatural* fandom on tumblr varies greatly from person to person.

The only way, then, to see posts which are unpopular – that is, a *true* aggregate of fandom as it textually exists – is to journey into the tags. This explanation of the notes and tagging system on tumblr has several functions. First, tagging is an essential part of tumblr and therefore, discussion of its implementation is essential to an understanding of the manifestation of fandom. In addition, an understanding of the tagging system reveals one of the key issues of doing an ethnography about this type of community. If you search a tag on tumblr (like *supernatural*, *spn*, *spnedit*, an actor/actress's name, or *spn* followed by an episode number), the website will return a list of all original posts by all users marked with that tag in the order they were posted. There are certain taboos about things to put in the tags which are followed to a certain degree – generally, do not put your hate in the tag (especially without a *wank for ts*, the tag used for negativity or unpopular opinions), do not copy and paste someone else's post as your own (*reposting*), only original work in the *spnedit* tag, etc. The tag is a great place to go during an episode for real time reactions (*liveblogging*), or after an episode for questions, answers, meta, or quick *codas* (fic written after an episode airs, as an extra scene or an additional or alternate ending). Replogging does not show up in the tags – only original posts. If you reblog

something and tag it, those tags are only functional for searches within the blog you are viewing. The tag is also a place to get news about fandom goings-on or find new people to follow.

In summary, users tag in order to increase their audience, to keep their blogs organized so they can review things later, to express their opinions, emotions, reactions, etc., and to allow people to block content they don't want to see. The online fandom has no central group of people or ideas or spatial connections which drive the community. It is an unbounded entity. The textual evidence of its existence can be traced to an extent through the tagging system; rather, you can search for it in that way. However, many users do not tag at all, and rarely visit the tags. It is possible for me to do a review of the textual elements and productions of the community, and to an extent, the popularity of those productions. It is not possible for me to say anything definitive about the experience of every user, because every user's experience is framed by the people they follow (what part of the community they interact with) and how they specifically use the platform.

Tumblr represents a more streamlined, virtual version of what fandom has been doing for decades. Part message board, part journal entry, tumblr is a multimedia platform for interacting with other fans, or simply putting your own thoughts out into the universe. As tumblr user weightlesslives wrote, "Posting on tumblr is like talking to your cat. You don't know if they are listening, and you don't know if they care, but for some reason, it still helps."²⁴ It is also a bit like shouting into a crowded room of other people who are also shouting – much like a convention would be. Maybe people nearby will hear you and laugh or agree, or maybe no one will, but the outlet for the excessive feelings often associated with fandom is essential. For the modern fandom, tumblr acts as a constantly updated, globally produced, multimedia, real time

²⁴ <http://weightlesslives.tumblr.com/post/36723566288/posting-on-tumblr-is-like-talking-to-your-cat-you>

Zine of fandom old. Because of this and all of the other things I have mentioned, Tumblr provides an excellent petri dish for examining the practices of the modern fandom.

THE PHYSICAL

Up until very recently, the internet was not the main avenue for participating in and creating fandom. Fandom has been around for much, much longer than the internet, which means it manifested itself primarily physical ways. In days of fandom old, fan clubs, mailed “zines” and conventions constituted fandom. Historically, these “real life” practices were then able to transcend into new forms in the virtual sphere of the internet as technology developed. However, as it stands now, this process has reversed. The internet being such an accessible and multifunctional tool has allowed more and more young people to participate in fan activities, with little cost or strain on their daily life. In today’s fan life, gatherings in real life are the privilege of the few, but they do happen and are worth noting. In fact, it is when fans gather in large numbers that the community is most visible – and most vulnerable. When virtual realities merge with physical realities, it creates *extreme* excitement for nerds, and *extreme* confusion for everyone else.

The primary occasions for fan gatherings are conventions. Generally held by some higher power, conventions provide the opportunity for fans to see and be seen by actors and creators, for creators to sell merchandise, and to meet other fans. For the *Supernatural* community, there are two types of conventions: those exclusively about *Supernatural*, and those which involve many more fandoms, such as San Diego Comic Con, the largest international Comic Con.

These two types of conventions are entirely different, although they do have a few things in common. Both types of conventions are expensive to attend – when you consider ticket prices, lodging, food, and other expenses like photos, autographs, and souvenirs, a convention weekend

can run you anywhere from \$400 to \$2,000, if you attend the entire event. The monetary investment in a convention weekend makes the experience both more exclusive in the types of fans who can attend or are willing to attend, and more important for the fan to have some sort of significant experience. In other words, something special must come out of the weekend for it to have felt worthwhile – follower increase on tumblr, run-ins with the cast, new friendships from people met at the event. Both types of conventions feature actors and producers in attendance of some sort of panel format. Actors and/or producers on a stage are asked questions about the show, and answer them live in front of fans. In both environments, fans generally have the opportunity to pose a few questions themselves.

A larger convention like San Diego Comic Con lasts four days, and takes place in a large convention center. Fans usually stay in hotels nearby, in groups with people they know in real life who are fans, or with friends made online. These types of conventions have one floor or section dedicated to artists selling things – new books, comics, toys, merchandise – and another section with multiple rooms for panels with guests from all forms of media – actors, authors, directors, composers from movies, television, comics, and video games. In order to attend panels, fans must wait in line to be in the room where the panel will take place, and appearances are limited. For *Supernatural*, there is one, one-hour panel on one day of the convention. For the last several years, this panel has been the first thing in Hall H – which holds 6,000 occupants – on Sunday morning, at about 10:00 a.m. on the last day of the convention. If you come to San Diego Comic Con in order to attend the *Supernatural* panel, chances are you will have to spend the night on the grass outside the convention center. Not for a front row seat, either, but for the chance to get in the building. Some come prepared, with sleeping bags, earplugs, and eye masks, but many also show up with just a sweatshirt they happened to pack (*if* they happened to pack

one; not many expect night to get so cold in Southern California in July). Most people get about four to six hours of sleep.

The panel is conducted by a moderator who presents a list of pre-composed questions which are answered by the guests; in recent years, Jensen Ackles (Dean), Jared Padalecki (Sam), Misha Collins (Castiel), Mark Sheppard (Crowley), and Ben Edlund and Jeremy Carver (Executive Producers).²⁵ These questions are generally relevant to the most currently aired canon, and are similar in nature to questions asked in previous years. The guests present a sneak peak from the episode, a section of the gag reel from the previous season, and then allow two or three audience members to ask questions. From observation, the attendants of the panel at these conventions are generally between the ages of fourteen and thirty five, with a majority in the fourteen to twenty four range, and split fairly evenly by gender, with a slight majority of females.

Supernatural conventions are different environment from larger Comic Cons. These conventions, run by Creation Entertainment or Asylum outside of North America, take place in hotels, where fans and actors stay and attend the event. These conventions take place in primarily two large ballrooms. One, where there are small tables with merchandise, and another large room with a stage and seats. For these conventions, fans buy their seat along with their ticket – no lines, no competition. Fans stay in their seats all day or come and go as they please, and different actors from the history of the show come up for panels. Unlike a larger Comic Con, these guests are often actors who have not appeared on the show in a number of years, or were only in a small number of episodes. Also unlike a larger Comic Con, there is no moderator for their panels. These actors get up on stage alone, and fans from the audience form a line to ask them questions for an hour. These conventions are much more conducive to fan activities, as they allow fans to

²⁵ For a cast list of all characters and actors relevant to my project, see Appendix C.

directly ask their questions – about character motivations, significant symbols, where that character is now, etc. – and receive direct answers. These answers then are relayed to the fandom (many fans in the audience liveblog on twitter or tumblr) and can affect their creations, just as fandom influences the type of questions being asked. From observation again, fans at these conventions are almost entirely females ages fourteen to thirty five, with the occasional male. At Comic Con, which contains attractions for many different interests, fans may attend panels for things which they are only casually interested in; at *Supernatural* conventions, there are no casual fans. The contrast in gender makeup of the two types of conventions suggests that male fans of *Supernatural* are not as prevalent or passionate as the female fans. In general, because individual seats are purchased, older fans sit in the front while younger fans sit towards the back, because closer seats are limited to special weekend ticket packages, which are much more expensive.

Conventions allow fans to share proximity with actors and creators, who have a more privileged viewpoint into the characters and their world. This draws them to convention centers, much like relics or holy spaces draw pilgrims. Protestants are hesitant about pilgrimage because of the idea of “divine localizability”, or the idea that an omnipresent god would be *more* present in a certain location than anywhere else.²⁶ For fandom, the story is not omnipresent – it exists only where people are aware of it, and even more so around the people who created it. The actors and directors who attend conventions serve as referents of the story, and bring the divine (the story) into the local; they act as mediators for the story to be transmitted to the fans. The fans in attendance then, can bring their new experiences and knowledge back to the fandom in a way that is also highly mediated, in the form of liveblogging. Fans sitting in the audience will type

²⁶ Mark Wynn, “God, Pilgrimage, and Acknowledgement of Place,” *Religious Studies* 43, no. 02 (April 2007), 156.

out things said or seen and post them in real time for people not in attendance to view. The results are very subjective (and often highly misinterpreted) summaries of the events of the convention.

By this point, I hope I have firmly established the function of conventions, and how the fandom interacts with actors and creators in this unique environment. Primarily, the fandom attends conventions not in order to achieve physical proximity to the actors; they attend conventions in order to gain physical proximity to *the story*, *through* the actors. This point is paramount, and it is one that I think many people fail to understand. In the “religious” system that is fandom, we are not the devotees of the people who create the show. They are not our Divine; *the story* is our God. The actors and creators are more like saints or prophets, who mediate the story for us.

This fundamental misunderstanding leads to the majority of conflict between the showrunners (a group vaguely defined by fandom; “the suits”, executive producers, and the like. From this point on, The Powers That Be, or *TPTB*, as fandom calls them. This group of people does not attend conventions) and the fans. TPTB believe that *they* are our God, a concept which they neither understand nor respect. They do not understand the fundamental difference between themselves and the story itself. They believe that because they created the story, it only exists on their own terms – which fandom directly disagrees with by its very existence. They believe they have authority over the story, which means they have power, while fandom would say they *only* have power; the power to control what parts of the story that are expressed for viewership. Beyond that, they do not understand why anyone would worship (because that is what they think we are doing) something that they were just making up for money.

These ideological misunderstandings lead to conflicts with the fandom. Generally, there is a spectrum of understanding or empathy among the individuals that make up TPTB – from CW executives to executive producers to directors to writers to actors – and depending on the amount, there is more or less conflict. The higher ups generally have the least understanding, which can lead to directorial choices that upset the fandom. These choices include things like the creation of the character Becky Rosen. Becky was meant to be the in-show representation of the fandom, but the homage was anything but loving.²⁷ Becky is socially awkward but sexually adventurous, and generally uncomfortable to watch. She sexually harasses Sam, and even drugs him into marrying her in one episode. Aside from Becky, until recently there was no in-show evidence TPTB were even aware of the fact that the fandom (and their viewership) is almost entirely female. An episode in season five featured a convention for the *Supernatural* books, which exist within the show. The only woman in attendance was Becky, and the narrative framed the event in a less than complementary light; in fact, several higher-ups have expressed their opinions on DeanCas shippers as crazy and delusional.²⁸

The pervading opinion on their part appears to be that shippers want canon relationships because it will satisfy our need for erotica (i.e. just because we want to watch two guys make out), not because it is founded in any legitimate way in the canon. Recently, CW executive vice president of marketing and digital programs, Rick Haskins, was quoted in an article about the *Supernatural* fandom for the *Wall Street Journal* online, saying, “I think there is something of a

²⁷ One of the sub-arcs in season four of *Supernatural* was to introduce the character Chuck Shirley. The Winchesters find Chuck after discovering the book series, *Supernatural*, a series of dime store novels detailing all of their adventures since Dean picked Sam up from Stanford (the beginning of the show). Chuck turns out to be a prophet of the lord who had been having visions of their activity, and he published them to make a living. In the show, the books have achieved a cult status, with a small group of highly enthusiastic fans, including Becky Rosen. This is referred to as the meta arc.

²⁸ Aja Romano, “WB Executive Deletes Twitter Account after Angering ‘Supernatural’ Fans,” *The Daily Dot*, 2013, <http://www.dailydot.com/fandom/supernatural-destiel-fans-wb-exec-twitter/>.

snowball effect on Tumblr for that show... It just feeds on itself. I really think of Tumblr as the male Pinterest.”²⁹ Continually, there is a lack of recognition and respect for the female portion of the viewership, which also mainly constitutes the fandom as I will show in the next section. Especially for a show with such a turbulent relationship with renewal, this careless comment by the executive discredits the female fans by failing to recognizing them, and ignoring their personal efforts and enthusiasm which keeps the show on the air.

The Powers That Be, however, are not the ones who generally attend the conventions. There is a middle group of people – the stars of the show, active writers, and directors – who attend, and have either slightly more empathy, or at least a little more tact. Jensen Ackles (Dean) and Jared Padalecki (Sam) know what fans like to hear and what they do not like to hear, and they know what to say to get the crowd excited while dodging the more heated questions. It seems that they (and most of the male cast) have an understanding that our passion fuels their paychecks, so their gratitude or self-interest (depending on your opinion) causes them to praise us or avoid incendiary answers.

Even more so, there are a few cast and crew members who seem to really “get” us – lesser characters and female characters, and writers who are nerds in their spare time. These individuals are the closest to transcending the line between fan and creator, although they still remain distinctly distanced. This group, including Misha Collins, Osric Chau, Kim Rhodes, Robbie Thompson, and Felicia Day, among others, have the most sympathy and understanding, and sometimes even step in to soothe us when “higher tiered” players cross lines. In many circles, these names listed here are considered minority voices, side characters, and are treated as periphery by TPTB.

²⁹ Mike Shields, “CW Promotes ‘Reign’ on Pinterest, ‘Supernatural’ on Tumblr,” *CMO Today - Wall Street Journal*, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/cmo/2014/10/03/cw-promotes-reign-on-pinterest-supernatural-on-tumblr/>.

This pilgrimage opportunity in the form of conventions allows fans to step out of their trance-like state on the internet and interact with the “real” world, material entities of their community. Oftentimes, because of a lack of understanding about fandom practices, there is an abundance of conflict, which ends in two ways. Fans are either inspired by these conflicts, to create and produce more in order to show their detractors that their opinions do not matter to the fandom, and they could not be more wrong anyways. These events send fandom into a flurry, which create memorable moments, even if they are not good memories. They can also lead to an awakening of sorts, in which fans have so much criticism for TPTB and are so frustrated with the lack of respect on their part, that these fans leave fandom completely, bringing their energy to a grinding halt and killing a little bit of the fandom along with it.

CONCLUSION

This description of the spaces of fandom serves the function of setting the scene. In order for fandom to manifest, it must have places of congregation, and in order to understand *how* it manifests, one must understand the spaces in which it does so. It must be noted that I have included the actors and showrunners in this section in order to objectify them. This is not because they do not actively participate in the world, but because the fandom does so, to an extent. I do not mean to imply that the fandom views them only as one dimensional aspects of their environment, or that the fandom sexually objectifies them in a harmful way. Instead, the fandom objectifies them in the sense that they are like set pieces or props on the stage of fandom, which are out of the fandom’s control. They can be interacted with and certainly have agency of their own. Additionally, the fandom has an intimate if not complicated knowledge and respect for these people. The actors and showrunners are part of the spaces because ultimately they are separate entities from the fans, which can cause problems or assuage them. They are the channel

through which we receive the story, and they introduce obstacles or challenges to the daily experience of fandom. Their inherent separation from fans because of their status as creators makes them part of the spaces fans occupy, rather than agents on the same plane as the fandom.

Section Two – Practitioners

In this section I will discuss the type of people who become fans, based on theoretical analysis and empirical data. I will also discuss what about their personalities draws them to fandom, and what about *Supernatural* specifically draws their personalities. In doing so, I will draw similarities between fans and mystics in order to illuminate the motivations for joining a fandom. I will also be analyzing the meanings that fandom and the show has in the lives of the fans, as well as analyzing the religiosity of fandom.

BEING

Although anyone has the ability to become a fan, the *Supernatural* fandom does attract a certain type of majority. From a multiple choice, online survey I conducted between November 1 and January 15, 2015, I can confidently state several statistics about the composition of this particular group.³⁰ The *Supernatural* fandom consists of approximately 92% females, 3% males, and 5% individuals who identify as neither male nor female. The majority of this group is aged between 18 and 24 at 67%, with 25% between 25 and 34, and 6% between 35 and 44. Only 3% of fans identified as younger than 17, although that may have had to do with the easily avoidable parental consent requirement. Approximately 68.1% of this group lives in the North American region, with 26.5% in Europe, and 5.4% living in the regions of South America, the Middle East, Asia, and Australia³¹. This group is approximately 43% sexually attracted to either gender, 34%

³⁰ This survey project was reviewed by the UNC IRB and approved under number 14-2454 as non-biomedical research on human subjects. Data taken from answers to the free response survey will not be given quantitatively, but qualitatively. As they were grouped and analyzed by general idea or theme, the free response data is slightly too subjective to be assigned quantitative data without a large amount of uncertainty. Data taken from answers to the multiple choice survey will be given in percentages. Participants were given the option to respond to both the free response and the multiple choice surveys, which were given separately.

³¹ It should be noted that the survey was only available in English, so this data only represents the people who participate in an English-speaking fandom. For instance, I know there are conventions that take place in Japan as well as Japanese dubs for the show, so I imagine there is a much larger Japanese population of fans than this data

sexually attracted to the opposite gender, 8% sexually attracted to neither gender, 6% sexually attracted to the same gender, and 10% individuals who have another sexual orientation. Among these individuals, 93% of respondents identified as feminists, 4% do not identify as feminists, and 3% are unsure what feminism means. Compositely, the average *Supernatural* fan is a college-aged, feminist, bisexual female who lives in North America, which agrees with my experience based on participant observation. These details are significant not only because they shape the individual's identity, but also because they shape how individuals react and relate within the context of the *Supernatural* fandom. This profile also directly contradicts the demographic profile of the majority of the creators of the show, TPTB.

Historically, mystics have been both males and females, met with varying degrees of respect and opposition from the religious community. Mystics or mystical practices are found in almost all world religions and even outside of spaces deemed "religious". In contemporary times, mystical experience is primarily seen as a feminine activity. One study finds mysticism and mystical experience to be more highly correlated with femininity.³² Another study shows that females are more likely to report mystical experience.³³ Several feminist scholars are pushing back against these perceptions of mysticism to create a more nuanced definition. Grace M. Jantzen traces the historical social construction of mysticism in its relation to white Western power dynamics in her article, "Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics." She writes, "If mystical experience is seen as gender-related, especially available to women, and at the same time as private and subjective, then this can be used to reinforce stereotypes of women as the spiritual

suggests. However, it *is* an American show filmed in Canada, so it makes sense that the majority of fans live in North America.

³² Calvin Mercer and Thomas W. Durham, "Religious Mysticism and Gender Orientation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 1 (1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387592>.

³³ Lene Sjørup, "Mysticism and Gender," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 2 (1997), 53.

nurturers of humanity while keeping both women and spirituality firmly domesticated.”³⁴

Stephanie Ebersohl notes the connection between mystics and hysterics, in the Lacanian sense meaning an, “object that cannot be mastered by knowledge.”³⁵ She continues, “Once the mystic achieves Liminality, then, she can access knowledge and challenge not only the content, but also the place from which it originates.”³⁶ She draws the conclusion that female mystics, receiving a privileged knowledge, hold a certain power that causes male society to both fear and discredit them. Scholar Mercedes Arriaga Flórez notes, “Against the feminine mystique, which is socially elaborated and exterior... we can place the mystical experiences of women as an interior phenomenon, a space for rebellion and insubordination against the world’s rules.”³⁷ This suggests that the practice of mysticism then would become a vehicle for female expression and creation.

Because of the entanglement of patriarchy and the construction of mysticism, a feminist definition of mystical experience would be most useful. Scholar Don Cuppit defines three aspects of mysticism: ecstasy, illumination, and infused contemplations.³⁸ Even more broadly, scholar Jess Hollenback describes seven common characteristics of a mystical experience: it can be in any form, begins in some sort of recollection and involves a radical metamorphosis of consciousness. It then results in privileged knowledge of the Real, privileged knowledge of salvation, great affect, and illumination. She also notes that not all of these characteristics must be present at once in order to qualify an experience as mystical.³⁹ Although the definition of

³⁴ Grace M Jantzen, “Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics,” *Hypatia* 9, no. 4 (1994), 187.

³⁵ Stephanie Ebersohl, “Riddling the Subject: Female Mystics, Hysterics’ Faith,” no. Spring (2003), 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ Arriaga Flórez, “Body Mystique, Mystic Bodies”, 225.

³⁸ Don Cuppit, *Mysticism After Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 24.

³⁹ Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, 40-41.

mysticism has been highly contested, this definition has been chosen for its flexibility and therefore relevance to the discussion of fandom. Hollenback writes:

“This definition of mystical experience differs from most other characterizations or definitions of mysticism because it says nothing about the particular object of that experience. Instead, it focuses primarily on its mode of genesis, its essential amorphousness, and its acute sensitivity to cultural and historical conditioning. Mystical experiences may or may not bring the individual face to face with God. Whether or not they do so depends on whether the notion of divinity is a significant element in the mystic’s religious or historical environment.”⁴⁰

Hollenback understands that the definition of mysticism is highly dependent upon the context in which the experience is occurring. This definition of mysticism does not favor any one belief system or mode of achieving mystical experience, making it feminist in its intersectional inclusivity.

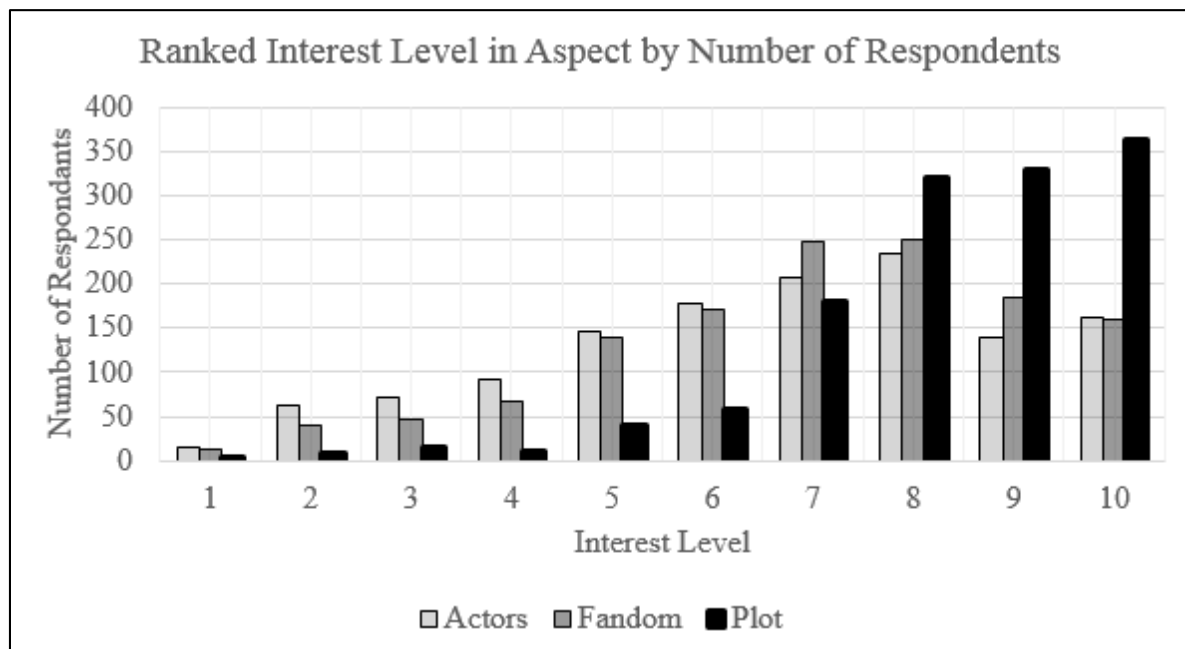


Figure 1: Respondents asked to rank their interest in plot, fandom, and actors of the show on a scale from one to ten, one being least and ten being most.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132.

Fandom mimics mysticism as a source for shaping knowledge and spirit for women. However, there is an abiding suspicion by outsiders (and occasionally a belief in insiders) that fandom is *itself* a religion – not that fans believe the show to be real (although that is an accusation to be the subject of another inquiry), but that the practice of fandom, perceived to be worshipping actors, fills the role of religion in the life of the fan. This line is not for me to draw; religion may or may not intersect with fandom in ways unique to the individual. The religious identification of the fandom has a fairly broad distribution. About 24% identified as atheist, 19% as agnostic, 12% as Catholic Christians, 11% as Protestant Christians, 12% as spiritual but not religious. Only 6% of respondents identified as Mormon, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Satanist, or Wiccan. Additionally, 7% identified as unsure of their religion and 8% identified as something not yet listed. On top of this, as Figure 1 shows, the majority of fans are primarily interested in the plot, the show itself and its themes, over both the fandom and the actors. This indicates that the “worship” of the actors does not play a significant role.

To be entirely clear, the majority of fans do not worship the actors. The large majority of fans find the plot and the characters to be far more important than the actors and writers. The fandom is not made up of the people who would stalk actors outside their houses or take pictures of them in their bathrooms. The fandom has a respect for these people because they create the thing that they love so much, and they generally do not confuse this with a genuine love for these real people. In fact, the general objectification of the actors on the internet – exemplified by fanfiction and art – separates fans from the actors as subjects. Fans may be in love with the actors as objects, admiring them for their beauty, but outside of the fantasy of objectification, they recognize that these are real people with real families who deserve respect, and fans will keep their distance. The interactions had at conventions between fans and creators, then, can be

particularly moving for fans, because of the privileged position of proximity they hold to the canon.

By far the most evocative free response question asked to fans was whether or not they felt that fandom was religious. Most users replied no and some users replied yes, but a majority expressed their answers without any certainty. The answers here were greatly framed in two factors, stemming from the broad way I phrased the question. First, the definition of religion asked to this group of people is most likely placed where “religion” is very strictly constructed, mostly to resemble Christianity. In that context, many people expressed that it was absolutely not religious. For example, tumblr user Trickster-shi wrote:

“Not really. If anything, the way the show has treated religion in general has kind of given the fandom a sandbox in which to explore religion and remake/revamp it in our art. Religion itself doesn't seem to really factor in a whole lot, because even though the characters use religious artifacts or exorcisms, they don't treat Christianity as though it's the Only Way. They kind of took it off the pedestal and presented it as just another chapter in the history of the world, because God is real, but so are other Gods that came before, and remnants of all of them still exist.”

Although the show focuses on the events Christian apocalypse, it constructs itself that Christianity exists in just as much reality as all major world religions. Christian angels and demons coexist with classic Greek gods, Norse gods, and Hindu gods, among others. Trickster-shi expresses the contrast between the reality of the show and the Christian reality, that all other religions are false. In this sense, Trickster-shi says the show is not religious, because it contradicts the Christian notion of religion. Second, the association between religion and fandom has been continuously used to degrade fandom as overzealous and crazy. It seemed that many users wanted to shy away from the term, giving a short, concise “No” when other answers were quite lengthy. Tumblr user jennilah wrote:

“Actual formed religion, no. We are not worshipping a God here. How we participate in fandom can sometimes feel like a religion at times. We do idolize the characters and actors that we see on screen to a point, and sometimes follow the instructions that they

give us. We do form in groups and make friends through fandom... I don't know, it's hard.”

Users like jennilah recognize the similarities in practice between religion and fandom, but were hesitant to say it outright. One possible explanation for this is the fear of blasphemy, or contradicting their own religious beliefs. Even if users may not identify as religious, they might not want to define fandom as religious in order to avoid offending the religious.

Users were also asked if *Supernatural* had changed their own beliefs. Most users replied no, some replied yes or somewhat. These answers were framed in the same discourse surrounding the previous question, but the difference in phrasing invited a few more open answers. Tumblr user Ishipcockles wrote:

“I'm not sure if I would use the word "beliefs" but it surely affected my relationship with religion(s). It's a subject I've always been interested in. I've read all of the major religious texts and studied virtually most of the religions when I was in high school. Personally, I'm not a religious person, though. I don't have faith in any of those. But I'm strongly fascinated by all of them. When I've started college my studies I didn't have time to pursue this interest anymore, but when the show came out I suddenly started studying it all over again. I'm graduating in "Foreign Languages and Cultures" and I've decided to graduate in "Theology" too after that.”

Aside from a general interest in religion as a subject – which many users in addition to Ishipcockles reported – some users also described the ways the show influenced their personal beliefs. Tumblr user saywhatjessie wrote:

“You mean in the way it kind of forces fans to analyze their own spirituality? Definitely. My family is raised Catholic, my older sister my younger brother and I have all received the sacrament of confirmation. My younger brother, however, right when he was supposed to be confirmed said he didn't want to. He'd already gone through years of CCD or catholic religion classes and he was almost done, almost at the finish line, the rest of us had done it, but he said he didn't want it. I was his sponsor and when he was supposed to write a letter to the Bishop explaining why he wanted to be confirmed, he said he didn't want to lie to a priest: that he didn't actually believe in this, that he wanted to own up to his own life and not blame or credit anything in his life on an unknowable God. Do I think he might have come to that conclusion if not for the help of a Winchester? Maybe. But Supernatural and Dean and Sam's battle against God and destiny definitely helped.”

The mythology of the show provides a safe space for fans to consider their own spirituality.

Similarly, tumblr user clumsiestangelinthegarrison wrote, “I've always been religious, but

Supernatural helped me find my faith again. It's weird, but the idea of angels being like us, flawed and prone to change, gave me hope.” Tumblr user Gyokujyn wrote:

“My religious beliefs are very fluid, so that's pretty likely, but I couldn't point to an example, if asked. I am an atheist who wishes I weren't. There is a strength and reassurance that my religious friends and family find in their faith that I am jealous of, but I just can't have blind faith. I need to stick my fingers in the wound, so to speak. I want the answers to all the questions and I know that I'll never have them and that leaves me bitter.”

These three responses indicate the function of the show and fandom as an area where religion and spirituality can be explored, along with other things, but this is not its primary function. The disconnect between religion and fandom resists the desire to classify fandom itself as religion. However, the practice of mysticism as mode of union with another entity provides an effective model while satisfying this desire.

Don Cupitt writes, “[mystical] experiences are everywhere couched in the locally available symbolic vocabulary. Every [mystical] experience is a datable human cultural expression.”⁴¹ Fans are doing the same things that mystics are doing, but aimed in a different direction and using a different set of terminology. For example, one of Jess Hollenbeck’s seven characteristics was the experience of great affect, a sort of respectful and admiring gaze, which she describes as “to tremble ‘with love and awe.’”⁴² Similarly, popular culture scholar Purnima Mankekar describes *bhaav*, a phenomenon she discusses regarding Indian women watching television. She describes it as something where, “one had to surrender to the mood of what was being watched; to learn from it, one had to be immersed in that state of being.”⁴³ She also notes

⁴¹ Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 21.

⁴² Hollenbeck, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, 55.

⁴³ Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Post-Colonial India*, 25.

that *bhaav* comes “intimately, at a level beyond mere empathy.”⁴⁴ The similarity between affect and *bhaav*, both inspired by the object of the practitioner’s focus, cannot be understated.

Further, Cupitt defines the mystic’s desire for “immediate knowledge” – a union between mystic and the divine, resulting in an unmediated knowledge.⁴⁵ Through fandom, fans can achieve a similar knowledge of the story itself; not as it exists in canon, but its essence as the individual believes it. Religious Studies scholar Robert Mullen writes, “Belief is the act of imagining. It is what the act of imagining becomes when the object thus created becomes more real (or more self-satisfied, more empowered).”⁴⁶ Fans use imagination to capture the essence of the story, and create belief in it through sharing fanworks with the fandom. This allows their imaginings to become more real, and results in more intimate knowledge of the reality of the story, even though there may exist competing realities within the fandom. In short, both mysticism and fandom, “discourse at length about the Ineffable, use erotic metaphors to describe matters purely spiritual, and speak in visual terms about the Invisible.”⁴⁷ The connection between mysticism and fandom may not be perpendicular, but it is certainly parallel. Fandom allows individuals to explore their own ideas about the reality of the story, and this imagining brings it closer to themselves. Because the story is fictional, it is equally fictional (ineffable, invisible) in the hands of the creators on the television and the hands of the fans on the internet. Therefore, fans have the power to unite with this fictional universe on their own terms, using their own modes of connection. For the mystic, this could be discourse or erotic metaphors, but for the fan, it is fandom.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵ Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 24.

⁴⁶ Robert F. Mullen, “Holy Stigmata, Anorexia and Self-Mutilation: Parallels in Pain and Imagining,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 9, no. 25 (2010), <http://www.jsri.ro/ojs/index.php/jsri/article/viewArticle/250>, 105.

⁴⁷ Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 25.

JOINING

When asked what was the most important aspect of fandom both personally and in general, why they participate, and why they feel that fandom is important, users overwhelmingly stressed the connections they had found in the community. This was related to feelings of shared ideas, similar interests, social activity, belonging, acceptance, being yourself, and communication. Tumblr user mybuckystar wrote: “My greatest love is stories and fandom is a community of people who are all passionate about the same story. Fandom creates an outlet for discussing and loving the same story. Loving a story by yourself is lonely.” Beyond the connection to the story, fans seek connection to each other as well. Scholar Heidi Campbell notes that online community development depends on the return of committed members.⁴⁸ Fans are able to create community using the story as a catalyst for connection. Scholar TE Stâncel writes, “There is a need in today’s society for a transcendental source of support and safety as a solution against an insecure, fragmented against itself and thus destabilizing world.”⁴⁹ This suggest that the community forms due to some sort of pre-existing aspect of the individuals who join it.

Tumblr user highdeans expressed the feeling of many fans, writing:

“The camaraderie among the fans is a really great aspect of fandom. Growing up, I was always the kid who liked things too much or who was too weird. And I thought I *was* weird until I kind of stumbled into fandom and realized, “Oh, wow, there are other people who like stuff too much. I’m not weird.” And y’know, you follow someone for a long time, you go through the ebbs and flows of fandom together. You weather the wank, you go through phases, you grow, you learn, etc.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, “Community,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 58.

⁴⁹ TE Stâncel and FN Ormeny, “Transdisciplinary Approach of Imagination and Angels - The Transcultural Hidden Third: From Andrei Plesu to Basarab Nicolescu,” *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai* 57, no. 1 (2012), <http://www.ceeol.com/aspx/getdocument.aspx?logid=5&id=57627a8dd63b48708d7bf8c2e34c7f47>, 130.

⁵⁰ Tumblr user trickster-shi wrote: “Fandom is about community, in general. About finding ‘your people’ and constructing relationships that help you grow. It’s about coming together as a big, wonderful, diverse, dysfunctional, and strange family that defies the boundaries of your immediate vicinity. It’s about supporting something you love and helping others do the same, and it tends to bleed out from being solely about the original content to supporting the people of the fandom, to supporting worthy causes, and bringing a sense of purpose that’s

While admiration for the show may bring fans to the fandom, the friendships they make keep them there. Tumblr user natsukichan2912 expressed a similar feeling. When asked why they participate in fandom, they wrote, “Because to me it feels like I’m in a big family that everyone is the weird cousin.” This familial sentiment was echoed in many responses.⁵¹ Fans often feel like their obsessions are creepy or uncool, so finding a community that feels the same way is important for validation and acceptance. Implicit in these answers is the commonality between individuals found from their mutual enjoyment of the show and emotional connection to the characters, which can be seen in a response from tumblr user thefirstwinchesterwasain: “I think it’s about falling in love with a story. I think it’s about loving a story so much that it becomes part of yourself. I think it’s about allowing that story to love you back.” As these answers illustrate, the connection to others was the most prominent theme in the answer to all questions related to the importance of fandom. The connection to others allows one to connect more deeply on a personal level to the story.

Calvin Mercer defines Stace’s differentiation between introvertive and extrovertive mysticism, where extrovertive mysticism involves the “inner subjectivity of all things” and the

often missing in modern life. Fandom entertains us, but it also helps us learn and grow, hopefully into much better people than who we were when we started.”

Similarly, ladyoftheblacklake wrote: “I think it makes people feel less alone. I think people have latched onto the show because of the themes, characters, and complex content. And those people have found others just like them in the fandom. We’re all a little damaged in some ways (as most humans are), and fandom lets us know that, hey there are other people just like me, who like the things I like, and care about things as intensely as I do, and who are a little bit broken just like me. And that’s awesome. It’s nice to feel connected.”

⁵¹ Tumblr user Loki-Dancing-In-The-Shire wrote: “It serves as an escape from my own craptastic and stressful life. I suffer through depression and social anxiety and it allows me to really connect with the characters from Supernatural and other shows/movies. My fandoms mean so much to me. You meet so many friends through it all and get the chance to see and appreciate people with amazing talents such as those who draw fanart and write fanfiction. Some of it is truly amazing and underrated by the rest of the world. Also, the actors themselves can make such an impact on my life by simply being themselves. Many of them are my role models and I greatly appreciate everything they have given to this fandom... I think it is just a gathering of people who enjoy the same things, but still manage to balance diversity and different beliefs under one roof. We are all just one big family and we support each other, even the people we aren’t close to. And like all families, there are fights and disagreements, but at the end of the day, we are all here for the same thing we love and I think that is so important in and of itself.”

“perception of *unity* in the diversity of things.”⁵² As it relates to fandom, extrovertive mysticism echoes the sentiment of fans who wrote often about feeling connected although they knew everyone was different. Fandom has the attitude of a patchwork quilt; it attracts people from different backgrounds and different areas but unites them under this one thing, the show. Another study of reports of mystical experiences found common descriptions of the “experience of unity” and the “sense of connection and relation.”⁵³ Lene Sjørup writes, “These descriptions of unity are paradoxical; there *simultaneously* is unity and difference. The connection to all of creation does not necessitate an annihilation of the self. The self is empowered in this experience of unity. Even as borders and boundaries are experienced as permeable, an awareness of distinction and difference is maintained.”⁵⁴ As written in these chosen responses, members of the fandom notice that individuals are distinct, but still feel united to them by the thread of the show. Drazenovich writes, “While both psychosis and mysticism lead to perceptual changes, the effect of each change are distinct. Unlike the mystical experience, in which the perceptual change leads to greater integration, in psychosis, the perceptual change in experience leads to increasing fragmentation and confusion.”⁵⁵ The union felt by members of the fandom to each other helps them to feel whole through the community, similarly to mystical experience creating wholeness through the understanding of divinity.

Beyond this, users view fandom as a place for creation and expression. This is accomplished by a variety of methods, but frequently in critical dialogue with the canon. Tumblr user fozmeadows wrote about the significance of participating in fandom:

“Because it makes me happy, and because I don't see the point in telling stories if we're not going to discuss them... Humans telling stories about stories, trying to understand

⁵² Mercer and Durham, “Religious Mysticism and Gender Orientation”, 175.

⁵³ Sjørup, “Mysticism and Gender”, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵ Drazenovich and Kourie, “Mysticism and Mental Health: A Critical Dialogue”, 2.

themselves by looking at the world through a lens that makes them happy, and then telling new stories about whether or not we've succeeded.” For many users, the analysis of the story allows them to know it more deeply, while also bonding with each other. Tumblr user iman-angel-youass added, “I think of it as a place where people can enjoy, appreciate, and offer up their own theories, interpretations, hopes, hates, loves and thoughts about the show and its characters. I honestly think it's as simple as that.” Fandom allows people with similar passion to come together and share those passions, fostering and growing them for individual and communal meaning. Tumblr user chivalricdean defined fandom as:

“A bunch of people coming to together to discuss the thing they all enjoy in one way or another and expand the universe of said show, game, book or whatever so it fits their own view to share it with others. It's also about celebrating the work in a way but fandom also always has the creative and the criticizing aspect.” Because the average *Supernatural* fan on tumblr is primarily college-aged, these discussions can be incredibly insightful, as well as multi-disciplinary and theoretical. The criticism allows for creation; fans see something in the show they would like to change and they do so themselves through fanworks. Stâncel writes that there is “a need for a flexible and creative approach to the religious experience, one permitting a more creative personal evolution throughout various cultural patterns.”⁵⁶ Here, “religious experience” can be understood as any method of understanding life and its questions. Fandom presents a way to shape their experiences and understandings through the creation of fanworks.

Additionally, creation comes from holes in canon, things unseen that fans wish to see, things unsaid that fans wish to hear. These holes can also sometimes result in criticism, especially when one considers the tendency for *Supernatural* to be a story about straight, white males. Tumblr user winchester-fairytales writes:

⁵⁶ Stâncel and Ormeny, “Transdisciplinary Approach of Imagination and Angels - The Transcultural Hidden Third: From Andrei Plesu to Basarab Nicolescu”, 131.

“There hasn't been a specific work within the fandom that's had a noticeable impact, as it was more the fandom as a whole has had an impact. Most of the fics I find/like to read are aus with one or more of the main characters (typically Dean or Cas, but sometimes Sam) having a representation that fits me (ex.: Bi!Cas, Genderfluid!Dean, etc.). It's something that I know is never going to happen in the show because that's just how television is, but it gives me a sense of belonging that I can't get from the show itself.” Because the average *Supernatural* fan is a bisexual (or at the very least, a feminist, interested and accepting of varying sexualities), the lack of representation of different sexual identities presents a major point of contention for the fandom. Tumblr user skommy agrees, writing:

“As a queer person myself I've always had a hard time finding decent queer media. While the show itself doesn't really HAVE that (with Charlie and a few nods as a small exception), the fandom is full of talented people who do. In a way... having all that content out there, available from so many places and so many people, it makes me feel more "normal". Queer people don't get to see a lot of themselves out there and it can make you feel like a bit of a freak.” Because the show has this lack of queer representation, the community, which is primarily queer, can change it to suit themselves. Stâncel notes that, “the phenomenon of creativity and inspiration takes place in the zone between ideologies, dogmas and various types of expertise.”⁵⁷ Fandom practices allow fans to navigate and adapt the world of the show to bring it closer to themselves. The community of the *Supernatural* fandom, in critical dialogue with the canon, also engages in critical dialogue with each other about real world issues and understandings. Because of this, fandom not only fills the need for community, but also results in personal growth and intimacy.

BECOMING

The two most major themes in *Supernatural* center around two major points of contention: the battle between free will and destiny, and the battle between transgressions and redemption. For several seasons, it seems that all of heaven and hell and earth were conspiring to force Dean, Sam, and Cas into predetermined roles in order to cause the apocalypse. These three,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 132.

canonized as “Team Free Will”, chose to overcome the forces of divinity and go their own way – saving the world and all the people on it. Tied into this battle is the battle of transgressions and redemption, especially when the transgression involves addiction. Sam was cultivated by a demon in order to make him Lucifer’s vessel. In order to make him strong enough to hold Lucifer, the demon forces him to drink demon blood as a baby, so that as a man he could drink more and gain pseudo-psychic powers. Sam deals throughout the series with being born with a darkness and still trying to overcome it to be good.

These two conflicts tend to be resolved through the third theme, familial bonds. From its inception, the show stresses the importance of family. For their entire childhood, due to their mother’s death and their fathers arguably implied abuse and alcoholism, all Sam and Dean had were each other, and they had to protect themselves from the monsters in the dark. More importantly though, their adopted Uncle Bobby says the line “Family don’t end in blood, boy,” which has taken a life in the fandom and in the second half of the series as the Winchesters try to rebuild their lives into something healthier and less codependent. This involves making new friends, surrounding themselves with people they love, and doing their best to keep them whole, happy, and nearby.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t always go well, which leads to the fourth theme –grief and loss. In battling vampires, werewolves, demons, angels, and ghosts, there are going to be some casualties. The Winchesters build their surrogate family, but they lose members along the way. Somehow, the Winchesters carry on and learn to deal with death, even when faced with the reality of the afterlife almost every day.

These four themes culminate into a very universal story about the nature of humanity.

These themes are all issues that are relevant to the human experience, but they are perhaps *more* relevant to a certain kind of personality. Pop culture scholar Leo Partible writes:

“The superhero story acts as an allegory of the human struggle as seen from the eyes of heaven. The insignificant matter, the mediocre human existence so seemingly mundane – small compared to grand events of a planetary scale in the universe – is in truth of great cosmic significance. It is important enough for the entire host of heaven to watch the unfolding epic of humanity defined in the microcosm of the every human experience. Such stories address the questions, “What are we here for?” “Why?” and “Where are we going?””⁵⁸

Although the Winchesters are not technically superheroes, their knowledge of the supernatural world as well as their function as protectors of the unknowledgeable places them in the same space.

When asked about the impact of the show on their lives, many fans wrote in about the show as a source of hope and inspiration. Another significant portion spoke about how the story and the characters help them get through a particularly difficult time in their lives. Tumblr user Winchestercannibal wrote:

“I was adopted as a baby, and for me, family has never equaled blood. Family is such a huge part of the show, and their emphasis on the fact family doesn't end with blood has been something I have been drawn to from early on. The exploration of Sam's addiction arc and Dean's self-hatred mirror things that either myself, or people very close to me have gone through. The show gives a healthy escape, while still giving the ability to work through issues. Sometimes there are things I hadn't even realized I dealt with, until watching these characters experience the same emotions.”

Watching the characters on screen allows for cathartic relief for many fans. Participation in fandom heightens and extends this catharsis. Similarly, user night-is-calling wrote:

“I started watching Supernatural during a very dark period in my life. I was struggling with a lot mentally and I didn't care about much of anything - except for this show. It distracted me from everything I was dealing with and it gave me something to do. Watching it really helped get me through that time and gave me something to be invested in and excited about.”

⁵⁸ Leo Partible, “Superheroes in Film and Pop Culture: Silhouettes of Redemption on the Screen,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, ed. B.J. Oropeza (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2005), 248.

Going through the personal catharsis and sharing it with others helps individuals on their personal growth, and secures the show a very special place in the heart of the individual. Tumblr user deansjourney added, “It helped me to come to terms with parts of myself I tried not to think about; it helped me to find faith again and it gave me so much hope in humanity, in the importance of doing your best in every occasion, in not giving up, ever.” According to survey results, about 77% of the fandom has personal experience with depression (either depressed themselves, or know someone close to them that has depression), and 51% have personal experience with self-harm. Additionally, 50% have experience with alcohol use and 33% have experience with drug use. About 39% reported personal experience of more than mild familial dysfunction, and 22% reported personal experience with physical abuse. Only 13% of the fandom responded that they had no experience with any of these issues. These issues were chosen specifically because of their presence either literally or metaphorically in the themes of *Supernatural*. Viewing these themes in the form of this show and watching characters deal with them helps these people cope with their own issues and grow personally. They see themselves reflected in the story and that draws them in past casual viewing.

Similarly, mystical experience has a number of correlations to these sorts of unfortunate human experience. Scientifically, stigmata is related to self-mutilation and anorexia, and there is a correlation between cutters, spirituality, and asceticism.⁵⁹ One study shows that depression acts as a catalyst for mystical experience.⁶⁰ Robert Mullen notes the ability of both mysticism and self-mutilation to allow one to “[assert] power over a body that may be lacking in other forms of control.”⁶¹ He writes, “Experiencing a transcendence from the ugly and unfragmented into what

⁵⁹ Mullen, “Holy Stigmata, Anorexia and Self-Mutilation: Parallels in Pain and Imagining”, 97-99.

⁶⁰ Sjørup, “Mysticism and Gender”, 57.

⁶¹ Mullen, “Holy Stigmata, Anorexia and Self-Mutilation: Parallels in Pain and Imagining”, 99.

one might describe as an aperspectival wholeness. Pain transforms the cutter's self-fulfilling perspective of her image of inadequate body-self as she becomes her own agent of change."⁶²

The actions of both mysticism and self-mutilation result in a new unity and fulfillment. He notes, "It is here that the phenomena of the stigmatic and the self-cutter merge to encompass the mutual bricolage of pain, imagining, languaging, self-identity, and scientific supposition within *bodies under siege*."⁶³ He continues:

"And the self-cutter, and/or the stigmatic, transcends her ordinary life into one of empowerment, one that transcends the mundane, the lonely, the emotionally feeble... Voluntary pain – and this is emblematic for both the mutilator who cuts herself, and the stigmatic who welcomes a spiritual agent to inhabit her being – is an instrument of self-transcendence in a meaningful and communal context."⁶⁴

Both mysticism, self-mutilation, and fandom are ways for people who search for more control over their lives to find it, if not by entirely different means. They allow for unity, connection, and wholeness.

Beyond just the show, users also expressed the ways in which fandom has impacted their lives. Some wrote about the ways in which specific works made them feel. Works that create strong emotional responses in fans are especially popular. These works can be emotionally evocative because of personal affection for or relation to characters. Tumblr user Phantoms4evr wrote:

"Twist and Shout (fic)- I cannot listen to Elvis or Fools Rush In (Can't Help Falling In Love) without feeling a twinge of the agony I felt reading the last few chapters of that fic. Again, fanfic for me is kind of a 'safe' way to experience a bunch of emotions I've never had to deal with. I've never been in a relationship or been in love, but reading about characters in love is a kind of surrogate for that to me. Likewise I've never lost a close family member or loved one (and hopefully won't for a long time), so reading about what those characters feel and how they cope with it is a 'safe' way for me to explore those feelings as well."

⁶² Ibid., 94.

⁶³ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 104.

Aside from fanworks creating sympathy, empathetic works are also very popular. These works invite the reader to reflect on their own lives. Tumblr user perpetualgeek said:

“We Found Love In A Hopeless Place by Talesfromperdition on fanfiction.net. This story was a Destiel fiction that was an alternate universe that focused on Dean and Castiel's respective mental health and dysfunctional family issues. This story was really well written and fairly accurate in the description of mental health issues such as depression and self-harm and the different ways people use to cope with it. This story resonating with me for multiple reasons, which included the fact that I am therapist and this stuff appeals to me and the fact that I once struggled with self-harm. I was drawn to this story and I think it made me a better person for it. It has helped me in my job.”

Fandom and fanworks allow for members of the fandom to cathartically deal with their own issues in a way that is both intimate (because they are their own issues) and distant (because they are being mediated by the characters) to themselves. Tumblr user sarcastically-canadian wrote:

“I think the most impacting thing about the work from the fandom would be the fanfiction. I was diagnosed with depression last year and it helped me escape the troubles I was having. I found it also helped me calm down if I was having an anxiety attack. It would make me laugh when I needed it, cry when I needed it, and allow me to escape into the life of someone else. I wish I could tell you one specific piece but I've read so much and I don't even remember who wrote most of them.”

The number of specific responses like those of perpetualgeek and sarcastically-canadian were quite high. Fanworks allow readers to work through issues in a cathartic way through the vessel of characters which are dear to them. These catharses not only allow the fan to grow personally, but also grow their kinship to the character, strengthening their bonds to the story. The connection between individuals to the story and each other carries meaning in the lives of these people. Sometimes this meaning has very little impact, and sometimes it has a lot. These connections create the energy of a fandom.

When asked about fandom in general, most users referenced the friends they made – friends they would have never made if they hadn't joined the fandom, friends from different parts of the country or even different parts of the world – and the community as a place where they could express themselves, gain some new perspectives, and get help working through

difficult times. A few users spoke of the very real, affective power of fandom. Tumblr user tatteredcastiel provided this personal narrative about how the fandom impacted their life:

“They saved it as well. Like I said, I went through a terrible night about a month ago and I had taken a handful of pills before writing on tumblr just saying I needed help I was doing something terrible and I needed help. The amount of messages I got was astounding and they were all different. Folks telling me I deserved to live and they loved me and would miss me when I was gone, folks coaching me through the whole ordeal, folks who offered their support for not only this time but whenever I needed it.

Ultimately I threw up the pills because of them and I am here today because of them.” Stories like this, unfortunately, are not unique. I have heard many stories about the show or the fandom and the community literally saving the lives of people who had no hope or nothing else to live for. While these people have real illnesses that may need professional attention, the supportive community they find in fandom or the connection they feel to the story can be enough to keep them holding on long enough to reach out for help. These connections, established through fandom as a vehicle, are what fandom is truly about.

CONCLUSION

In this section, I have shown – through statistical evidence supported by my participant observation – the types of people attracted to fandom and *Supernatural*. The show and this fandom attracts women who find catharsis in the themes of the show, and kindred spirits in the fandom. The fandom presents a space where fans can communicate, discuss, analyze, and change the canon in order to suit their particular needs. Through participation in fandom, individuals are able to connect more deeply with each other, thus allowing them to connect more deeply to the show. These connections carry great importance in the lives of the fans, either superficially as a form of entertainment or significantly as a life changing entity.

Section Three – Practices

The central assumption of fandom is that all members participate due to the lack of sufficient expression that comes from average viewing. Rather than turning off the TV when a show is over and being finished with it, the fan is struck by the unfulfilled feeling. Fans turn to fandom because they *need more*; living in a universe for an hour each week (about forty two minutes, when you consider commercial breaks) is simply not enough. By immersing themselves into the material culture of online fandom, fans extend their stays into their fictional universes, allowing themselves to experience the *more* they were longing for.

Just like the mystical practitioner, it is not simply enough to desire the experience of *more*. Some action must be taken, even if it is just preparation to receive *more* (knowledge, love) from or unity with the divine. As defined by scholar Christopher Helland, “Ritual is purposeful engagement with the sacred (whatever the sacred may be for those involved).”⁶⁵ This broad definition of ritual certainly applies to both mysticism and fandom, although I am not going to go so far as to claim that either practice is ritualistic. However, I do wish to stress the importance of the material culture as a function of this desire to connect more deeply. These (digital) material instances indicate the presence of two mental functions – recollection and imagination. Scholar Jess Hollenback defines recollection as “that procedure wherein the mystic learns to focus one-pointedly his or her mind, will, imagination, and emotions on some object or goal.”⁶⁶ In mysticism, this recollection results in visions, sermons, poetry, and song. In fandom, it results in surprisingly similar outpourings, such as fanfiction, fanart, meta, edits, songs, videos, etc.

⁶⁵ Christopher Helland, “Ritual,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 27.

⁶⁶ Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, 94.

Hollenback also notes that there are two effects of mystical contact as a result of recollection – one interior, which results in the desire to get more of that mystical contact, and one exterior, which results in the desire to change the way you live in the non-religious world.⁶⁷ Even more than the recollective aspects of creating a material culture, fandom uses the imagination to unite with the source material, changing and remaking it into something far more personal. T.E. Stâncel writes:

“The history of the affirmation of the imagination as man’s supreme faculty – capable to connect the transcendental with the transcendent (to provide a communication channel between the two/to bring them in a state of dialogue) – is the history of man constructing, harmonizing, and organizing interactively within himself... and within the ethos of his society... as a catalyst-like space of movement and projection capable to essentialize the otherwise void and biasing space from in-between faculties.”⁶⁸

The imaginative aspects of the material culture of fandom – extending from the canon, or even derailing entirely – move the creations and the essence of the story from something outside of themselves to something inside and intensely personal, allowing members to better understand the canon and themselves. The combination of recollection and imagination in fandom demonstrates not only their deep knowledge and devotion to the source material, but also the ability for the source material to both affect and be affected by the individuals and the community.

In the following section, I am going to detail and explore the material culture of the *Supernatural* fandom as it originates on Tumblr, and branches out into other corners of the web. The first subsection will cover fanfiction, the most prevalent of all fan activities. The second subsection will cover the remaining activities. In doing so, I am going to highlight not only the devotional nature of these creative works, but also the underlying religious themes in the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁸ Stâncel and Ormeny, “Transdisciplinary Approach of Imagination and Angels - The Transcultural Hidden Third: From Andrei Plesu to Basarab Nicolescu”, 141-142.

fanworks themselves. I will pull out some of the especially popular or interesting motifs in these works and examine what it means that they are so fixated upon, in light of this mystical model. In the spirit of fandom as an unbounded entity, I draw from a variety of theorists regarding multiple mystical traditions across space and time, as well as theory about iconography and angels, ritual studies, pilgrimage studies, and more. Fandom is such a multifaceted apparatus that it calls for such an approach.

Section 3A – Fanfiction

Fanfiction (*fic*, for short) is perhaps the most famous and infamous marker of fandom. Fanfiction is any story written by a fan of anything, about any part of that thing. Fanfiction often focuses on the main characters of a pre-existing story found in a popular TV show or movie, but can also center on minor characters about whom the author wishes to know more. There is a great deal of fanfiction about celebrities or band members in general. Fanfiction is classified into two categories, *canon* (the universe that the pre-existing story operates in) or *AU* (short for alternate universes, where characters are plucked out of their original plots and transplanted into plots with little to no relevance to the source material). Canon fics can be stories that happen before, after, or in between scenes of the canon, about main characters, side characters, or plots that the author wishes the show would have developed more or in slightly different ways. AU fics are primarily about character development; the traits of each character are examined from the lenses of entirely different situations, new relationships that were prevented by canon circumstances can be explored, and dead characters get more time living. These stories are ways for fans to explore, expand, and transform fictional universes for their own purposes and needs. Fanfiction is often uploaded to archival sites like archiveofourown.org (*ao3*) or fanfiction.net, then simultaneously uploaded to tumblr to boost views.

EROTICISM

While fanfiction can be strictly plot-based, often times it includes explicit scenes of a sexual nature. Of the almost 86,000 fanfiction works for *Supernatural* at the time of this writing on ao3, (second in number only to the Marvel Universe), about 55,000 of these works include some sort of romantic pairing (also called a *ship*, verb form *shipping*; characters that fans wish would enter a relationship; see also *OTP*, one true pairing or original top pairing, an individual's favorite ship), while 30,000 of these works contain graphic sexual scenes.⁶⁹ Take into account that on a show like *Supernatural*, where characters are primarily male, that these graphic scenes are often shared between two men (less than 3,000 works feature the most prominent heterosexual ship, Sam/Jess, and Jess died ten years ago in season one)⁷⁰. In previous fandoms, most notably the early *Star Trek* fandom, this practice was called *slash*, or *slash fiction*, from the slash between the two character names, but given the high proportion of these works to the whole body of work, I have found that label has fallen out of use in favor of the more general *fic*. Further, many users forgo the slash altogether in favor of ship names – usually some kind of portmanteau of the names of the characters – or simply the removal of the space (i.e. Destiel or Deancas). If names are separated, an “x” is just as common as the slash (Sam x Ruby, SamxJess vs. Sam/Ruby, Sam/Jess).

Because of these two factors, fanfiction perhaps may be solely responsible for the creepy reputation by outsiders of fandom. However, as David Jasper writes, “That which God has joined together let no-one put asunder, but that is exactly what we have done in the fracture of the

⁶⁹“Works in Supernatural,” *Archive of Our Own*, 2014, <http://archiveofourown.org/tags/Supernatural/works>,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

humanly erotic from the divine.”⁷¹ The mainstream shame associated with eroticism is ignored within the fandom. The fact of the matter is that the male/male relationships subtextually established in the show tends to motivate a large percentage of the fanworks of the SPN family, whether the works focus on *Wincest* (Sam/Dean) or *Destiel* (Dean/Cas). Even if the fics are not sexually explicit, the romantic relationships are the highlight of many of these works. Love is the center.

The most obvious comparison to make here is that between “slash fiction” and erotic mysticism. Laura Rival et al give a particularly useful summary of Bataille’s theories of eroticism:

“Eroticism, or the death of the subject in orgasm, is a necessary condition for achieving transcendence (the inner experience of self-loss); it is also the only form of true communication... In other words, we defy death and reach transcendence... by engaging in transgressive, mystical and ecstatic experiences, such as erotic activity”⁷²

Fans lose themselves in the second hand experience of characters (sexually) joining together, in a way that allows them to also join with the characters. The subject matter allows for an intimate knowledge of characters, which creates unity and intimacy. Chris Shilling writes, “Weber refers to eroticism as ‘an embodied creative power’ that facilitates a sensual experience of ‘unique meaning’ through a ‘boundless giving of oneself’ radically opposed to functionality and rationality. Erotic relations offer a ‘complete unification’ of individuals who would otherwise be separated by the ‘unbrotherliness’ of bureaucracy.”⁷³ When characters are boundless in erotic union with each other (and presumably readers are similarly boundless, depending on masturbatory habits), there are no boundaries to separate the reader from the essential being of

⁷¹ David Jasper, “The Erotic and the Mystical in Postmodernity,” *Theology & Sexuality* 11, no. 2 (January 2005), 74.

⁷² L. Rival, D. Slater, and D. Miller, “Sex and Sociality: Comparative Ethnographies of Sexual Objectification,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, no. 3 (August 1998), 298.

⁷³ C. Shilling and P. a. Mellor, “Sociology and the Problem of Eroticism,” *Sociology* 44, no. 3 (June 2010), 440.

the characters. Although the erotic release of the characters is simulated, the fictional nature of the entire situation allows for the union between reader and character.

Fans will read hundreds of these works – thousands of scenarios have been written in which two (or more) characters fall in love/realize their desire for one another, and then consummate this love. It is possible that the heightened presence of eroticism is due to the religious nature of the show; Douglas MacLead theorizes that religious associations play on oppression/repression, which makes the sexual more interesting to the audience.⁷⁴ He continues on to reference the conflict between the spiritual self and secular self as a point of contention for sexuality.⁷⁵ However, given that erotic fanfiction stems from shows with canons crossing all types of subject matter, I would argue that this probably does not fully account for the prevalence. Instead, David Jasper writes, “In love, everywhere becomes the one place, and the one place of love becomes the universe of being. We see how easy it becomes... to slip from the sacred to the profane and back again.”⁷⁶ Sex is a natural part of love for many people, so the extension of romantic stories into the erotic therefore is also natural.

The mainstream aversion to sexuality in fanfiction must stem from *somewhere*, and I do not think it would be a stretch to claim that the stigma is rooted in the fact that the majority of fanfiction authors and readers are female. Mysticism scholar Don Cuppit writes, “It appears that a certain misogynistic horror of female sexuality has in the past played a very large part in the constitution of religious worlds and the construction of religious systems of thought,”⁷⁷ and in this case, in fandom as well. This can be easily illustrated through the popularity and acceptance

⁷⁴ Douglas MacLead, “The Oppressed Self: Desire, Sexuality, and Religious Cinema,” in *Religion and Sexuality: Passionate Debates*, ed. C.K. Robertson (New York, NY, 2006), 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁶ Jasper, “The Erotic and the Mystical in Postmodernity”, 73.

⁷⁷ Cuppit, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 84.

of “bronies,” male fans of the children’s show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*; somehow the fact that grown men want to have sex with animated ponies is less repulsive than teen-to-middle-aged women wanting two males to consummate their love.⁷⁸ However, while *Friendship is Magic* does nothing canonically to suggest that viewers should desire a sexual relationship with the ponies, *Supernatural* certainly does nothing to prevent fans from routing for their male stars into relationships with each other.

A.A. Markeley refers to the narrative construction of “dual subjectivity” – which allows for the reading of a text as both hetero and homosexual.⁷⁹ In fandom, we call this *queerbaiting* – executives know that fandoms love slash shipping, so in order to raise viewership they place subtextual homosexual clues within the narrative to make fans think that it will transcend into canon without ever having to affirm queerness. In canon, this is achieved through directing and editing. For example, there is a scene in season eight where Cas steps out of a bathroom, all cleaned up after quite some time away. The camera starts at his feet and pans upward to his face. Cas says, “Well, how do I look?” and the camera jumps immediately to Dean, who is shifting in his jeans uncomfortably. The scene is almost identical in form to the pre-prom reveal in the 1999 film, *She’s All That*, which was immediately picked up on by fandom.⁸⁰ A.A. Markeley writes:

“By switching the gendered object of the male gaze from female to male and by disrupting the progress of narratives at important moments during which the reader is invited to gaze on a tableau in which the male body is the central focal point, [a kind of

⁷⁸ For more information on bronies and the reception of bronies, see Angela Watercutter, “My Little Pony Corral Unlikely Fanboys Known as ‘Bronies,’” *Wired.com*, June 2011, <http://www.wired.com/2011/06/bronies-my-little-ponys/>; Vauhini Vara and Ann Zimmerman, “Hey, Bro, That’s My Little Pony! Guys’ Interest Mounts in Girly TV Show ‘Bronies’ Enthrilled by Cartoon Equines; Characters ‘Aren’t One-Dimensional,’” *Wall Street Journal: The A-Hed*, November 2011, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203707504577012141105109140>; Sadie Gennis, “Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans,” *TV Guide*, 2013, <http://www.tvguide.com/news/bronies-my-little-pony-friendship-magic-1068692/>; Laurent Malaquais, *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (United States: FilmBuff, 2012).

⁷⁹ A. A. Markeley, “E. M. Forster’s Reconfigured Gaze and the Creation of a Homoerotic Subjectivity,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 2 (2001), 268.

⁸⁰ “8.07 A Little Slice of Kevin (Transcript),” *Supernaturalwiki.com*, n.d., http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=8.07_A_Little_Slice_of_Kevin_%28transcript%29,

narration is invented] that powerfully expresses [homoerotic] desire while shrewdly maintaining the veneer of heterosexual conventionality.”⁸¹ When the narrative encourages this shift – to “resituate the woman as spectator”⁸² – fandom erupts, because as a primarily female community, the opportunity is rare. Douglas MacLead writes, “Contemporary religious figures are in constant conflict with their sexual self for conflict’s sake and for the sake of a captivated viewing – and participating audience.”⁸³ Executives exploit this fandom tendency for slash shipping in order to gain viewership, but reserve the right to mock and deride female sexual expression in fandom.

I argue the (male) executives dislike when fans take the eroticism in the show into their own hands. Outside control over sexual urges mimics a proposed development of religion – humans create it to have the illusion of control over their chaotic lives.⁸⁴ Therefore their inability to control the fandom’s utilization of their characters for the expression of sexuality represents a loss of power on the part of TPTB – which makes them mad. Markeley continues, “Women do not envy the penis, [Irigaray] explains, but rather the powerful, knowing, phallic gaze.”⁸⁵ The creation of fanfiction is an act which puts fans in the position of the showrunners, manipulating the story whichever way they choose. Fanfiction allows women to prolong the shift from objectification to subjectification, and take control of the framing of narrative into such a way that gives *them* the power. This often takes the form of homosexual erotica.⁸⁶ Chris Shilling writes, “As Bologh argues, erotic couplings may involve a sacrifice from both parties, but women bear the brunt of violation in its physical and emotional forms.”⁸⁷ By removing the

⁸¹ Markeley, “E. M. Forster’s Reconfigured Gaze and the Creation of a Homoerotic Subjectivity”, 268.

⁸² Ibid., 274.

⁸³ MacLead, “The Oppressed Self: Desire, Sexuality, and Religious Cinema”, 96.

⁸⁴ C.K. Robertson, “Conclusion - I’m Okay, You’re a Heretic: Sex as Power and Threat,” in *Religion and Sexuality: Passionate Debates*, ed. C.K. Robertson (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2006), 240.

⁸⁵ Markeley, “E. M. Forster’s Reconfigured Gaze and the Creation of a Homoerotic Subjectivity”, 273.

⁸⁶ In addition to the chemistry of actors, the fandom widely attributes this tendency to the lack of female characters in the show with significant backstory and emotional stake to make them substantial for shipping.

⁸⁷ Shilling and Mellor, “Sociology and the Problem of Eroticism”, 442.

female from the sexual equation and positioning her as gazer, women can enjoy the sexual experience from a safe distance, or a location which she chooses herself.⁸⁸ Chris Shilling continues:

“Cixous views writing as a form of religious eroticism possessed of the potential to recover (feminine) identity and challenge the repression and binary oppositions characteristic of the symbolic order...In seeking to go beyond religion as oppressive, Irigaray insists that women need their *own* God so that they can appreciate their *own* genealogy – a representation of the divine enabling women to prefigure their subjectivity and fulfil their potential.”⁸⁹

Fanfiction is a source of power – a way to reframe the narrative in a way that suits the writer (and their readership), and eroticism is an extension of this. Chris Shilling writes, “The various forms of eroticism as modes of connecting and transporting individuals beyond isolated, routinized daily life. Eroticism here is a *positive* force.”⁹⁰ Whether it is done in conscious opposition to executives (generally speaking, it is not), the exploration of eroticism in fanfiction allows the writers and readers the ability to transcend both the narrative and the boundaries of the characters themselves, in order to unite themselves with anything of their choosing.

FORMATION

Beyond eroticism, fanfiction highlights the reflexivity of fandom and its unique form of creation. Fandom takes the motifs of the show, interprets them as they see fit, and then continues

⁸⁸ In a post titled “why do fangirls always make them gay”, tumblr user euclase writes, “Imagine being in a relationship in which you are treated like an equal, consciously and unconsciously, sexually, emotionally, socially, romantically, without being bound by gender expectations, without risk of pregnancy (or having your reproductive rights taken away from you), without feelings of inferiority, without being mistreated or neglected because men don’t understand your body and can’t be bothered to learn how to give you pleasure (or that you even deserve pleasure). Imagine having a reciprocating relationship with someone who knows how to touch you and how to talk to you, who will never abuse you or take away your consent. Imagine feeling powerful, safe, like the default rather than the specific or second-class. Imagine not requiring special handling by awkward, inconsiderate men who were never taught any better. Imagine being allowed to touch and enjoy and indulge without apprehension. Imagine being able to trust your partner. Imagine knowledge and understanding, someone who sees your depths and treats you the way you’d treat yourself if you hadn’t been told from birth that you weren’t worth it.

Girls aren’t “making them gay.”

Girls are fantasizing about being equal.” Found at <http://euclase2.tumblr.com/post/90927125452/why-do-fangirls-always-make-them-gay>.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 445-446.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 442.

to interpret fandom interpretations as if they were canonical. A historical example which will illuminate this phenomenon is the case of Pseudo-Dionysus, who was responsible for the conception of the angelic hierarchy for several centuries of Catholic doctrine, even though his false identity called the entire system into question.⁹¹ Joad Raymond writes, “When the deception was uncovered, the Church was reluctant to dispense with the foundations of so much of its devotional writing, and sought to ignore the scholarly arguments or preserve the visionary integrity of the writing on the grounds that they had been accepted for centuries.”⁹² The exact same thing happens in fandom through fanfiction. Even though we have extensive pictorial evidence that Misha Collins is both ripped and tanner than Jensen Ackles, Castiel is almost always described as pale and weak compared to Dean. Conversely, although there is no explicit canonical statement of child abuse, John Winchester generally becomes a villain in many fics. Ignoring canonical “facts” is almost a motif of fandom itself. Raymond continues, “A process of accumulation shapes [dogmatic writings about angels]. Once an issue has been discussed, and placed in a systematic development, it becomes part of a standard repertoire, a topos of analysis or argument. These are highly generic text: their particularities are worked out through the many things they share with their antecedents.”⁹³ Fanfiction allows us to redraw the lines from canon, and examine and evaluate the lines drawn instead by other fans. This creates for fandom the ability to tease out and circulate postulations and opinions. Raymond writes, “If we assume that [angels] are bound by the conventions of logic and the laws of the universe, if we think that they are creatures, then much can be learned about them that lies beyond the text of Scripture and the

⁹¹ Joad Raymond, “Angelographia: Writing About Angels,” in *Milton’s Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011), 23.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

stories of the Apocrypha.”⁹⁴ Fandom uses fanfiction as a way to explore and extend canon, as well as redraw the boundaries and rules in a way that suits the creator. Assuming the role of creator gives a fan a level of power within the fictional universe beyond that of just a watcher.

More than just the action of authoring, reading and reception opens an avenue for exploring individual identity and the identity of others, as well as contributing to the life force of the fandom. Lynn Clark et al writes, “We chose to tell certain stories as a means of communicating our concerns to particular audiences, and when our stories are received positively, we feel affirmed in our sense that we, and our stories, hold value.”⁹⁵ Sharing stories in fandom creates comradery, which is unique from traditional relationships between author and audience. The boundaries between creator and consumer are blurred. The erotic nature of fanfiction is arguably essential in this. Chris Shilling writes:

“There is always a violation of individuality in eroticism, in reaching beyond the present in search of transcendent meaning, and there is always a sacrificial component in the possession and merging central to erotic experiences and relationships. As Bataille’s comments about religious eroticism and sacrifice suggest, eroticism might be compared with that effervescence central to Durkheim’s account of how individuals are formed into collectivities.”⁹⁶

The fact that sexuality is such a prevalent theme does not detract from the value of the community or the expression of individual identity. In fact, eroticism may contribute significantly to the formation of the community. “Bataille treats eroticism as ‘an exuberance of life’; a commitment to living as vitally as possible up to death, and in which the boundaries associated with the ‘discontinuity’ of individual existence are dissolved. The whole point of erotic experiences and relationships, indeed, is to destroy the self-contained character of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁹⁵ Lynn Schofield Clark and Jill Dierberg, “Digital Storytelling and Collective Religious Identity in a Moderate to Progressive Youth Group,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 147.

⁹⁶ Shilling and Mellor, “Sociology and the Problem of Eroticism”, 441.

participants in their normal lives.”⁹⁷ Just as eroticism destroys boundaries between the parties participating in the sexual act, reading about eroticism destroys the boundaries between fans.

Laura Rival et al agree, saying that:

“Desire (which is by definition sexual, fluid and uncertain) constitutes the foundational core of self-identity, that self-identity requires continuity, and that the continuity of the person and of her or his inner self is not the inevitable unfolding of some biological truth, but self-made history. We are free, according to this hyperexistentialist manifesto, to choose what to be and how to realize our sexual desires.”⁹⁸

The individual’s freedom to express unites the individuals in the community – a person relates a desire, commonalities are shared, friendships are formed. Chris Shilling writes, “Here, the erotic is not a dizzying *escape from* daily life for some, at the expense of others, but a revitalizing reconnection with drives and passions excluded from masculine culture that can stimulate an *ethical reformation* of daily life.”⁹⁹ Reading erotic fan fiction is a conscious act. Sharing in this action with others is also a conscious act. Chris Shilling continues, “To experience the sacred through the convulsions induced by orgasm... constitutes the essence of humanity.”¹⁰⁰ Far from being a thing of shame or secrecy, fanfiction fuels participation in community and the growth of the Self.

Fanfiction serves many functions for fandom, in both its general and erotic forms. As erotica, it allows for the expression of perceived chemistry, relief of tension in the story, and power for the female writer. Just as the erotic can be a mode of mystical union, it also unites writers (and readers) to the story. In its general form, fanfiction demonstrates the way fandom builds on its own notions of the reality of the story, and challenges or perpetuates these notions.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 440.

⁹⁸ Rival, Slater, and Miller, “Sex and Sociality: Comparative Ethnographies of Sexual Objectification”, 295-296.

⁹⁹ Shilling and Mellor, “Sociology and the Problem of Eroticism”, 444.

¹⁰⁰ Rival, Slater, and Miller, “Sex and Sociality: Comparative Ethnographies of Sexual Objectification”, 297.

Fanfiction expresses the fandoms opinions on the course of the canon; it displays criticism in the changes it makes or does not make. Finally, fanfiction reflects the individual identity.

Section 3B – Other Practices

FANART

Second to fanfiction in infamy, fanart persists as a staple of meaning-making for fandom. *Fanart* may be defined as images created primarily by the artist's own hand, of scenes or characters from the canon.¹⁰¹ Fanart can be digitally rendered (usually in Photoshop, or in a free program of equal capability) or literally material. This definition is intentionally broad; fanart does *not* include all aspects of material culture which cannot be considered textual, but in my opinion, as a category it tends to contain miscellany. However, fanart as it exists in the *Supernatural* fandom, has to end up as part of the community. To give an example I once made an apple pie with the anti-possession tattoo (an important symbol in the fandom's iconography) laid into the top layer of crust. This pie, as it existed in my house and was subsequently consumed by my family, was not fanart, in that it was not an object for the fandom to consume (even if not literally to eat it). The picture I took of the pie and posted on tumblr *could* be called fanart, because at that moment it was contextualized into the community. This is not to say that nothing is an object of fandom unless it is mediated by tumblr; however, objects become part of the fandom when they are pushed out into the community. Further, fanart is generally only considered fanart when it is in the form of an image. Images are uploaded to tumblr, or uploaded to deviantart.com and then linked to promote views.

¹⁰¹Relevant examples of fanart are given in Appendix E: Selected Fanart.

Due to the religious nature of the show, religious themes in the art of the fandom are highly prevalent, as well as the eroticism discussed in the previous section.¹⁰² Characters are often drawn in poses that recall medieval icons or Passion images. Scholar Steven Grimwood defines the iconostasis as a composite image made of several icons, which “permits the viewer to see himself as stepping into this alternative space/time and participating in its reality.”¹⁰³ In these cases, the combined icons are the images of the characters, presented with the golden circle behind the head, indicative of Christ or the Virgin Mary. Grimwood continues:

“In a sense it is still true that the iconostasis represents the icon at its most ambiguous. Here the viewer - at least one who is unfamiliar with the language of the icon, and the community and liturgy of which it is part - is presented with a spectacle, a spectacle which they might admire and which might overwhelm them. ... Rather, the iconostasis always points beyond itself, its entire symbolic code directing the intention of the gaze through the royal doors into the space that lies on the other side of the threshold. ... In a space beyond the icon, our gaze is directed to a point where the liturgical stories of which the communicants are part are drawn together, focused and harmonised. But they are always held open, in a hymn that is constantly in progress, but modulated by the rhythms of unification, fracture and dispersal.”¹⁰⁴

The “religious” connotations of fanart are at the same time meaningless and meaningful. They are not meaningful in their original context, in that they invite the viewer to contemplate the nature of the Christology or the Virgin Mary, but their original context is meaningful in that the viewer ought to contemplate its relationship to the new context of the fanart. It is a hollow symbol; it resonates the new image with the old, and invites the viewer to think beyond that. Thus, the symbol takes on new meaning in the context of the new image. This process, repeated and reformed, causes the symbols evolve continually as fandom continues to manipulate them. “Within any system we are enabled to move beyond what is merely offered to us by the code,

¹⁰² Because the utilization of eroticism in fanworks has already been probed at length, I am going to move past the tendency of fandom to draw porn. It functions in primarily the same ways as writing porn does.

¹⁰³ Steven Grimwood, “Iconography and Postmodernity,” *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 1 (March 2003), 83.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

through participating in the narration of a story of which the horizons of meaning are constantly held open.”¹⁰⁵ These new meanings are individual and fluid, and depend on the individual instance of viewing. The meanings are also influenced by the individual’s pre-existing knowledge of the significance of certain symbols present in the art.

Another highly popular theme of creative fanart for the *Supernatural* fandom is the exploration of angelic nature and form. Angels as they exist in the show appear in strictly human bodies (called vessels), mostly due to the low *CGI* (computer-generated images) budget. References in canon to the ineffability of the angelic form to humans have made the angels a popular object of artistic study. Wings are an object of fascination for the artists of the fandom. The first canonical angel death occurred in an episode in season four called “On the Head of a Pin.” In this episode, the corpse of the vessel is surrounded by large charred black marks on the ground in the form of giant wings. Since its airing, the *Supernatural* fandom generated a thorough exploration of the nature of wings. Artists draw wings with black feathers, incredibly realistic bird-like wings, ethereal wisps in the general shapes of something vaguely wing-like, and more. Further, the angel Zachariah in season five references that his actual form has “six wings and four faces, one of which is a lion,”¹⁰⁶ which has inspired several artists to explore what the true form of an angel really looks like.

The result is an extensive body of surrealist and imaginative art. Scholar Nicolas Prevelakis writes:

“In an icon, however, the actual human material reality is extremely important, because it is the actual material way in which the divine manifests itself, but also because, as a depiction of Christ, a sacred icon depicts not any human figure but a human nature which

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁶ “5.16 Dark Side of the Moon (Transcript),” *Supernaturalwiki.com*, n.d., [http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=5.16_Dark_Side_of_the_Moon_\(Transcript\)](http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=5.16_Dark_Side_of_the_Moon_(Transcript)),

has somehow already become divine, which has been transformed and illuminated by the light of God. This humanity participates in the divine life.”¹⁰⁷
 As this model applies, the form of angels or wings in the art of the *Supernatural* fandom significantly embodies the actual form of angels in the universe of the show, because there is a lack of definition in the canon. Because the universe of the show is equally fictional on the television screen as it is on the artist’s computer, the image of “Christ” (the icon; in this case, the angels and their wings) is defined *only* by the one willing to put the effort into the defining.

Prevelakis continues:

“An icon is not conceived as a mere imitation or reflection of a person. It is supposed to participate in the life of the person depicted and derive its sacred character from its illumination by the figure of Christ, or the saint that it depicts... The icon, as a sacred image, is therefore contemplated and venerated in its actual form, even though one knows that the source of its light and sacredness lies beyond itself.”¹⁰⁸
 Thus, the art becomes icon, because it has that element of “divine” coming from beyond the image itself. The exploration of the true form of angels and their wings is not an exercise in religion – it does not reflect belief in Catholicism, or any other belief system in which angels are present. These images may use those sources for artistic inspiration, but the religiosity is not preserved. Rather, they are used to imagine the ineffable form of an infinitely imagined entity. The clues for the “true” image of angels in this universe are few, meaning that their interpretation is only limited to the artist’s imagination. Because these angels are fictional and not bound by religious rules, they are equally fictional in the universe of the show and the artist’s mind. The creation of various forms of wings and true!form angels exemplifies the way in which canonical statements get expanded and explored by fanart in order to access the unspoken or ineffable.

¹⁰⁷ Nicolas Prevelakis, “Iconography: Its Historical , Theological and Philosophical Background,” *Ekistics* 70, no. 418/419 (2003), 50.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

A smaller section of fanart consists of the illustration of Sam or sometimes other characters with the stigmata. This theme is appropriate considering the plot of the show; the main characters stand in as Christ figures, literally saving the world from the Apocalypse and championing free will. Vittorio Messori discusses the stigmata during an introduction to a work regarding Padre Pio, a contemporary stigmatic, writing, “The exterior “signs” of the Passion, after the long time of preparation during which they were hidden, are given to him so that his mission may appear more evident: Conformed to Jesus, marked by his same wounds, tightly united to him in sorrow and love, he can be an instrument, a channel through which salvation can abundantly come to men.”¹⁰⁹ Just as Padre Pio’s wounds changed position and manifestation often, the assigning of the stigmata shifts between characters.¹¹⁰ Artistically assigning the characters with the stigmata is meant to visually unite them with Christ. The function of this is not necessarily to venerate characters religiously, but to highlight their achievements and sacrifices in the universe of the show. The aesthetic choice of stigmata demands a certain type of viewing. Mary Richards writes, “Yet the spectator also becomes devotee, who, rather than turning away from these violated bodies, may choose, like the medieval contemplators of Christ’s suffering, to respond to the message inscribed in the blood that comes from the wounds.”¹¹¹ The image of the stigmatic character forces the viewer to respond in a highly emotionally charged way. Regardless of whether or not the individual puts stock in Jesus and Christianity, the image of a tortured, bleeding body evokes deep pity and an understanding of the context of sacrifice. “Bleeding bodies create intimacy and immediacy through the psychic shocks

¹⁰⁹ Vittorio Messori, “Introduction,” in *Padre Pio Under Investigation: The Secret Vatican Files* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), xiii.

¹¹⁰ Francesco Castelli, *Padre Pio Under Investigation: The Secret Vatican Files* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 48.

¹¹¹ Mary Richards, “Specular Suffering: (Staging) the Bleeding Body,” *A Journal of Performance and Art* 88, no. 1 (2007), <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/pajj.2008.30.1.108>, 109.

offered by the presence of flowing blood, and in a contemporary performance context his can be a power means of generating connection.”¹¹² This connection is not only to the characters, but to the artist, and to the other viewers. By viewing stigmatic art, fans may contemplate all the possible ways in which those characters reflect a savior or messiah, which joins them closer to the character. These reflections can then be shared, inviting conversation and personal reflection in other fans.

META

The word *meta*, in the context of fandom, simply means analysis, generally in the form of deconstruction like one would find in a high school English class. In a text post, writers will compose an informal essay about a topic, with an argument but probably with less strict rhetoric and syntax than anything academic. Meta usually has pictures or gifs in the midst of the text to support claims. Popular topics center around shipping – what the use of this song in the background of this scene means for the potential couples, instances that could be read as Dean’s bisexuality – but not always. More generally, meta is used to methodically explore whatever the canon explores; character development, plot developments. This is done through an analysis of staging, set design, directorial choices, lines from the episodes, body language, etc. Often the conclusions of meta tend to assert that because of certain elements of episodes as pointed out by the author, this certain thing will inevitably come to pass in the canon. Once posted, people reblog meta to agree or to argue, to continue the discussion.

The practice of writing meta functions similarly to mystical theological writing or sermons of famous mystics such as Bernard of Clairvoux, Henry Suso, or Meister Eckhart. Writing meta involves internalizing the source material and analyzing it for hidden meanings.

¹¹² Ibid., 111.

These hidden meanings are meant to either highlight something in the background of previous episodes to make something recent more emotional, or explain why the inclusion of recent things allow for a prediction of something coming up. Scholar Ryan J. Stark writes, “Mystical rhetoric is that into which Spirit enters, conveying to both writer and reader some aspect of providential *Kairos* that cannot otherwise be attained. That is, God completes mystical inferences. God participates, illuminating the hearts of those who open themselves to grace through faith.”¹¹³ The rhetoric surrounding meta posts often includes some sort of comment about sudden inspiration (“you guys, do you know what I just realized??” or “randomly thinking about [subject] when I finally figured out [conclusion]”). Meta often stems from deep consideration of canon, from which conclusions spring forth seemingly out of nowhere, much like the Spirit creates inspiration in mystical writers with comprehensive knowledge of theology. Meta is an analysis written by an individual, both so others can read and consider the argument as well as contribute with their own analyses.

GIFS AND EDITS

Gifs and edits both require the manipulation of video files into picture files, usually with Photoshop or an affordable equivalent. The file type .gif allows a user to take stills from episode footage (*screen caps*) and animate them in order, essentially creating a digital flipbook of a section of video called a *gif*. Gifs (verb form, *giffing*) can be made of a scene and uploaded into a photoset, which allows the scene of the episode to be viewed silently and at the speed of reading comprehension for the viewer. Gifs can also stand alone as single lines of dialogue. Half transcript, half video, these moving picture files allow for a more portable and accessible review of scenes or moments. In effect, gifs are almost never seen in context; because of the aggregate

¹¹³ Ryan J Stark, “Some Aspects of Christian Mystical Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Poetry,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41, no. 3 (2008), 260.

nature of the dashboard, often photosets of gifs will appear in random order when compared to the canon and dispersed between all other sorts of posts. As soon as new episodes air, diligent fans acquire the video files and begin giffing memorable, funny, or heartbreaking scenes; whatever is meaningful to the individual. Old episodes are also frequently giffed and revisited. Oftentimes gifs will be made with other words imposed on them other than the original dialogue, generally for humorous purposes. Edits combine the recollective nature of giffing with a heightened sense of aesthetic. Not animated, edits involve taking screen caps to edit out characters, pasting them onto themed background, and including some sort of typography. The words included in edits are generally epithets derived from notable lines about characters in the source material (Dean – “the righteous man”, Sam – “the boy king”, Cas – “angel of the lord”), song lyrics, or Biblical scripture. Edits are meant to evoke thought about characters or themes through the imagery and aesthetic of the edit.

Edits function much like icons in the mystical sphere. They allow for contemplation, evoke emotion, and recall key scenes or characteristics to the mind of the gazer. Because the figures in question are fictional anyways, their status as “real” doesn’t vary from screen to still.

Scholar Kokosalakis writes:

“The importance of icons, ever present in the Orthodox world, lies in their dual capacity to represent non-verbal theology and practice at both a collective and individual level....Icons are material signs, images that is, expressing and communicating for believers, invisible, transcendental religious reality. Images carry an important communicative and teaching function in most religions. Icons, however, are unique because of their special doctrinal and aesthetic character and their popular and ecclesiastical religious function.”¹¹⁴

Edits allow the creator to frame whatever character in whatever context they like in order to highlight something specific, like a noble trait or the emotional weight of a storyline. Similarly to

¹¹⁴ N. Kokosalakis, “Icons and Non-Verbal Religion in the Orthodox Tradition,” *Social Compass* 42, no. 4 (December 1995), 433.

iconography, edits use specific images and symbols from the show which can evoke certain responses. These responses may be slightly particular, but because they are rooted in canon, the maker of edits can control the general sort of feeling which they wish to evoke. Christopher Helland writes:

“Religious authority often dictates the symbols that will represent the sacred, how they will be used, who can use them, what benefit people receive from the action, etc. In the new online environment, all of these issues become contentious. Individuals have a great deal of freedom in the online environment to experiment, and even develop their own views regarding the role of the Internet in religious ritual life.”¹¹⁵

Making edits alters the original form presented by the images, rearranging them into a way which the creator of the editor wants. This allows the editor to have direct control over the framing of the images of the canon. Through the use of edits, viewers become agents in how things are viewed and in what contexts, based on their own emotional or sympathetic impressions.

When a person views the edit, they see the character, then the words, and then they contemplate the associations the creator was trying to convey. Kokosalakis continues:

“Icons as images do not only communicate information but also engage the emotions directly, and not just in a psychological but ontological sense. In icons, communion of the worshipper with the prototype is direct and immediate... Because of its personal character, the visual impact of the icon engages the worshipper existentially in a way similar to that which an encounter with another person inevitably does. The relationship of the worshipper to the icon is thus one of communication which engages the heart and the mind simultaneously.”¹¹⁶

The edits are specifically meant to evoke an emotion as well as thought. They present a new framing of the form of images from the canon, presented in new arrangements which create new engagements with the material for the viewer. Jess Hollenback claims that recollection is the primary vehicle of mystical experience.¹¹⁷ As a reminder, she defines recollection as “that

¹¹⁵ Helland, “Ritual”, 31.

¹¹⁶ Kokosalakis, “Icons and Non-Verbal Religion in the Orthodox Tradition”, 441.

¹¹⁷ Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, 94.

procedure wherein the mystic learns to focus one-pointedly his or her mind, will, imagination, and emotions on some object or goal.”¹¹⁸ Mystical recollection allows one to join outside (sacred) life with inside (profane) life, which is precisely the goal of fandom.¹¹⁹

Gifs push the power of edits as icon to the extreme. Gifs allow users to be constantly emerged in the show, in any location. Gifsets functions in many of the same ways as edits, except that they are moving and in some ways, living. The difference between the characters as they exist in the show and as they exist in gifsets is negligible; although gifsets have no sound, they have subtitles, which are often mentally read in the character’s voice. “Icons are not simply signs and symbols, either; for the faithful they are real personal bridges between the human and the divine.”¹²⁰ The universe the characters exists in does not change from TV screen to computer screen. In essence, the characters are no less “real” because sound is removed – quite the opposite in fact. The soundlessness of gifsets allows the voice of the characters to manifest inside the viewer’s mind, momentarily inhabiting their consciousness. As Kokosalakis writes, “icons, in other words, are fully spiritual and mystical representations. In iconography natural reality is radically transfigured into spiritual reality.”¹²¹

Generally speaking, giving something a reblog signifies that the creator has been successful in their goals of evoking emotion. Daniel Corstange writes, “It is not the mere act of displaying (or not displaying) iconography by itself that is interesting, but rather it is the content of the message so expressed that merits attention. Iconography provides a means to communicate with others, and its capacity to convey ideas is not diminished by the fact that the statements are

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 94.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

¹²⁰ Kokosalakis, “Icons and Non-Verbal Religion in the Orthodox Tradition”, 443.

¹²¹ Ibid., 440.

pictographic rather than written or spoken.”¹²² Through the use of edits, creators frame the characters in a way that is meaningful to them, and these edits get distributed depending on whether or not viewers adequately receive this message and wish to convey it themselves to others. As Don Cuppit asserts, “Religious experience are everywhere couched in the locally available symbolic vocabulary. Every religious experience is a datable human cultural expression.”¹²³ Edits are a way of expressing emotion about the show or characters, but edits also function as a way for users to present their emotions for others to view. In addition to this, the *specific* emotions created by an edit can be viewed in the tags. It is not uncommon to see an edit tagged with things like “my poor baby” or “haha stab me”. Scholar Jess Hollenback calls this the creation of affect, which causes viewers ‘to tremble “with love and awe.”’¹²⁴ Although edits are technically stills taken out of the action of the show, the emotions elicited by the edit are contextualized in everything that particular character has gone through in the narrative. Viewing images framed in a new context allow for reflection on the old context as well as a comparison between the old and new contexts. Viewing each other’s expressions and observing commonalities develops and builds the community.

MUSIC AND VIDEOS

Although music and videos represent arguably the smallest part of the material culture for the *Supernatural* fandom (certainly not so for some other fan groups), there remain a few important instances to note. Music and videos in fandom represent a unique interaction between interpretation, creation, and adaptation. Fans generally write original songs or create *fanmixes*, which are basically just mix tapes using pre-existing songs, about a character, episode, season, or

¹²² Daniel Corstange, “Religion, Pluralism, and Iconography in the Public Sphere: Theory and Evidence from Lebanon,” *World Politics* 64, no. 01 (December 2011), 153.

¹²³ Cuppit, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 21.

¹²⁴ Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, 55.

fanfiction. Videos (*fanvids*) are made by editing scenes from the show into new orders, either to highlight a character, theme, or ship. Usually fanvids are set to a popular song meant to correspond with the theme of the video. Videos are usually uploaded via youtube and then linked or embedded onto tumblr by the editor. Individual songs are uploaded directly to tumblr, while fanmixes are uploaded to 8tracks.com and then advertised (for lack of a better term) through a post on tumblr.

As Jess Hollenback writes, “The crucial problem that any mystic has to solve is this: How does one make contact with this “spiritual” realm when it is inaccessible to the five physical senses?”¹²⁵ Fictional characters and a fictional universe are just as physically removed from a person as the divine, so members of fandom are posed with this same question. Thankfully, St. John of Damascus might have the answer, “We use all our sense to produce worthy images of Him, and we sanctify the noblest of the senses which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye.”¹²⁶ In fandom, there is no touch, taste, or smell – only sight, sound, and imagination. Fans use all of the available senses to immerse themselves in the universe in as many different forms as possible.

Music is perhaps one of the most expressive forms of art known to human kind, and mystical practice lends itself well to it. Musical scholar Ivan Moody argues that the key characteristics of iconographic processes – exiting outside of time, provoking recollection, and a mysterious energy – can be extended to the genre of music in order to give it a place in mysticism.¹²⁷ Hymn writing has been traditional in the church for centuries, as is the tradition of mystical song. Songs in fandom allow for the condensation and dispersion of specific emotions

¹²⁵ Ibid., 96.

¹²⁶ Ivan Moody, “The Mind and the Heart: Mysticism and Music in the Experience of Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Composers,” *Contemporary Music Review* 14, no. 3–4 (January 1996), 65.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 68–69.

regarding the canon. Songwriters can take nine years of the show, turn it into a three minute song, and deliver it to the fandom for their agreement. The act of listening, empathizing, and then reblogging express a unity with the thoughts and emotions of the songwriter.¹²⁸ Videos, then, combine the musical ability of desublimation and the recollective powers of giffing, but also allow users to create new narratives. Fanvideos repurpose and reorder the canon narrative to create a new reading of the source material, all set to music meant to highlight the connection between this new series of scenes.¹²⁹ This is generally kind-hearted, as Chris Louttit notes about period drama fans, fans make these videos with “motives of tribute and homage.”¹³⁰ The videos tend to be “loving and appreciative rather than dark in tone or strongly politicized... In such period drama fan responses, therefore, there is a strong sense of faithfulness, if not in clichéd terms to the source text, then certainly to the characteristics and conventions of the genre itself.”¹³¹ Although this statement can hold for the Supernatural fandom, fanvids are also a way of reorienting the narrative in a way so that it tells the stories a creator wants to tell, and that creators think other fans will want to see, such as collecting romantically evocative scenes and setting them to the tune of a love song.

Historian Christian McWhirter describes some of the functional qualities of music during the Civil War in his book, *Battle Hymns: the Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War*. He writes, “Music was one of the most effective ways of expressing opinions and emotions... Setting a message to music made it more memorable and often more convincing... Music was available to all classes, both social and professional, and each American’s ability to use it was

¹²⁸ Christian McWhirter, “Part of Everyone’s Meat and Drink: Popular Music in the Civil War,” in *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 13.

¹²⁹ C. Louttit, “Remixing Period Drama: The Fan Video and the Classic Novel Adaptation,” *Adaptation* 6, no. 2 (April 2013), 176.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

limited only by his or her imagination and skill.”¹³² Music is an accessible medium through which people can organize and interpret events, thoughts, and feelings. He continues, “The war’s emotion, economic, and social impact on the nation encouraged the writing, production, distribution, and performance of music.... Established songwriters and amateurs alike received inspiration from the conflict that raged around them... Many of their songs were original pieces, but several offered only new lyrics for existing tunes.”¹³³ Although it would certainly be a stretch to directly compare the internet to war, the environment created by war – chaos, people from different religious, political, economic backgrounds cohabitating the same space, and the desperate desire for connection and unity – has the form of a sort of prefiguration of globalization,¹³⁴ which also colors the internet as a location of interaction.

Scholar Claire Jones discusses the role of mystical song in a budding Pennsylvania community called the Ephratesians, led by Conrad Bessel in the 1740s. She writes, “During this period, it was precisely in the form of the hymn that he considered his theology to be best expressed. Conrad Bessel’s eccentric compositional practices relates in a unique way to a long tradition of mystical voice and attempted access to the divine through song.”¹³⁵ These Ephratensians believed in a unique doctrine regarding original sin; that it was caused by Adam’s disconnect with the Spirit of Community, and that it was caused by a lack of song.¹³⁶ She writes, “Ephratensian song was practiced in order to reunify the human with the divine.”¹³⁷ The ability to produce song is a gift from God tied into the very core of their being, and must be expressed in order to rejoin with God. She writes:

¹³² McWhirter, “Part of Everyone’s Meat and Drink: Popular Music in the Civil War”, 12.

¹³³ Ibid., 15-16.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

¹³⁵ Claire Taylor Jones, “Prelude to the New World: The Role of Voice in Early Pennsylvanian Mysticism,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 3 (2011), 332.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 335.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 334.

“In the act of singing, the performers delve into the inner womb in order to regain the gift of song and thus give birth to praise of God – pure verbal production still being linked here by analogy to reproduction... man owes God the eternal praise that will come natural once he attains the full reopening of the spiritual womb of the heart. When this womb is open, it will continually give birth to song.”¹³⁸

For the Ephratensians, these songs allow them to (erotically) join with their God, in order to attain intimacy. In addition these songs were essential to vocalizing beliefs (as a key component of their identity) in the melting pot of denominations that was new America.¹³⁹

Both of these examples represent chaotic, unbounded environments from which songs sprang forth as a form of unification (divine or otherwise) and expression of identity, which is one of the functions of song (and certainly other genres of fanworks) in fandom. Songs and videos present an accessible and flexible genre which creators can use to explore the motifs of the show, as well as the areas outside of it. Songs and videos allow the fandom to examine the boundaries of the show, redraw, and reframe them for their own purposes.

COSPLAY

At both type of conventions, fans often do not just passively attend – they also participate in the material ways by dressing up as characters (or objects, in *Supernatural*’s case) from the show. This action is called *cosplay*. Conventions provide the space for fans to create and wear costumes, and sometimes take on the persona of a character in a (slightly more) normalized way than if they were to do so in an everyday place. Cosplayers will take days, weeks, or months to thrift, craft, or sew from scratch their outfits. The most popular characters are the most often cosplayed, like Dean, Sam, and Cas, but fans will also dress as more obscure characters, such as minor angels or monsters.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 338.

¹³⁹ Ibid., , 332.

Costumes play a significant role in religious activity in many belief systems, in a way that surpasses theatricality and has more transcendent resonances. The Rara ritual found in Haitian Vodou involves costumed people wandering through cities during the Lenten season, competitively dancing and singing.¹⁴⁰ Although the ritual has a festive atmosphere, “the earnestness with which all of its aspects are performed suggests their seriousness.”¹⁴¹ The religiosity of the ritual is not determined by the actions being performed, but by the manner in which they are approached by the practitioners. The Egungun cult, found among Yoruba speaking peoples, wear costumes to assume the spirits of their deceased relatives.¹⁴² Mary Ann Fitzgerald et al writes, “Resting motionless in a gallery, an Egungun costume ensemble is merely a shell of cloth. Its true power and purpose are activated only when a masker enters the costume, transformed into the presence and power of the ancestors in an Egungun ceremony... The Egungun ensemble acts as the medium for the masker’s transformation into his ancestors.”¹⁴³ These costumes allow the spirits of their ancestors to almost transubstantiate their own identities, giving them a mystical quality. By physically embodying characters, participants physically merge with them. This physical union allows for greater mental union.

Cosplay follows both of these examples. It is a practice taken seriously by those who go about it, even if the costume is not one of a “serious” character – a fan at VegasCon 2013 showed up as *Busty Asian Beauties*, a canonical porn magazine that Dean buys often; the costume was lauded heavily. When fans dress up as characters, they take on bits of those characters as part of their own identity, even if just in appearance. This pseudo-transubstantiation

¹⁴⁰ Susan Elizabeth Tselos, “Threads of Reflection: Costumes of Haitian Rara,” *African Arts* 29, no. 2 (1996), 58.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴² P.S.O. Aremu, “Between Myth and Reality: Yoruba Egungun Costumes as Commemorative Clothes,” *Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 1 (1991), 6.

¹⁴³ Mary Ann Fitzgerald, Henry J. Drewal, and Moyo Okediji, “Transformation through Cloth: An Egungun Costume of the Yoruba,” *African Arts* 28, no. 2 (1995), 55, 57.

allows for an element of union with these fiction characters for those who are cosplaying, and allows those around them to engage with the characters as well.

CONVENTION ATTENDANCE

Convention environments (read: sleeping outside next to strangers on the grass) not only highlight the devotion of these fans, but also creates one of those events that makes outsiders, including sometimes the very people attending the panel who fans are there to see, think we're insane. For ordinary people, that is, people who would not identify as fans, the sort of stigma associated with non-normal behavior is enough to deter them from participating. Outside of the internet, these events separate the casual viewer from the fandom. However, for those willing to participate, the energy created by this event is incomparable to any other. The bonds of friendship form instantly as fans communicate with each other in line or in audiences: there's nothing like a sleepover with six thousand people who love the same thing as you to create a community.

With this in mind, the model of pilgrimage becomes especially interesting to think through in its relation to convention attendance. Barry Stephenson, a scholar of Protestant Christianity, reflects on the conflicting role of pilgrimage in relation to Lutherans visiting Wittenberg, Germany, the former home of Martin Luther. Lutherans hesitate to use the term "pilgrimage" because it is associated with the Orthodox theology of grace through works. When he asked a Lutheran man why they came to Wittenberg, the man replied, "To see the history of the place, to see where the Reformation began. But it's not pilgrimage. I don't gain any merit by coming."¹⁴⁴ Lutherans travelling to Wittenberg do not do so in order to gain points with God; they do so in order to enrich their own spiritual lives, but the exact way in which this works is

¹⁴⁴ Barry Stephenson, "Pilgrimage, Sacred Space," in *Performing the Reformation: Religious Festivals in Contemporary Wittenberg* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), 172.

not clear from Stephenson's writings. Scholar and theologian Mark Wynn works through some of the modern Protestant Christian criticisms of the practice of pilgrimage in an article titled,

"God, Pilgrimage, and Acknowledgement of Place." He argues that:

"Pilgrimage may involve more than simple recollection, and we can even suppose that certain meanings may be presented to us (where this 'presentation' is not reducible to our rehearsing relevant thoughts) by virtue of our location at a place... Meaning is mediated by way of the relationships of physical continuity and physical proximity – and those relationships have to do with the organization of parts of the physical world."¹⁴⁵

According to Wynn, pilgrimage is a much more complex concept than travelling somewhere

blessed and becoming blessed, but the physicality of the event is essential for its significance.

Pilgrimage involves "states of emotional arousal" and has an "association with "experience",

but those are not its purpose.¹⁴⁶ Wynn argues that pilgrimage serves to supply a "referent of

believing", which can only be achieved through the physical travelling, not through any sort of

thought experiment.¹⁴⁷ He writes:

"By identifying herself physically with figures of exemplary sanctity (that is, not simply in thought, but by physical proximity to relevant relics or artefacts or, in general, places), the pilgrim is able to locate herself, tangibly... by placing herself in the 'presence' of the saint, the pilgrim locates herself within the wider Christian community. And thereby she achieves an indirect connection to the event of naming that stands at the source of the community."¹⁴⁸

Interaction with sacred spaces through pilgrimage provides the pilgrim with a field of signs

which allow them to better navigate their spiritual experiences. In the same way, interacting with

the creators of the show in the physical world allows fans to ask questions, share experiences,

and attain a deeper personal meaning for the show through these interactions.

In light of the mystical model, attending conventions has many meanings for the fans. In some ways, conventions function as churches. They are locations where fans can gather in

¹⁴⁵ Wynn, "God, Pilgrimage, and Acknowledgement of Place", 151.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 153.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 153-154.

fellowship and participate in the energy of the “higher power.” In other ways, conventions function as shrines, where the actors and producers act as material embodiments of the canon. Scholar Thomas Tweed defines the shrine as a, “sacred site that houses holy artifacts, promotes ritual practice, and attracts religiously motivated travelers, who often mark the time and extend the space of the journey by returning home with mementos.”¹⁴⁹ However, most importantly and partially due to the (monetary) sacrifice involved with attending, conventions serve as pilgrimage. Scholar Mark Wynn defines pilgrimage as, “a matter of encountering certain meanings, by placing oneself in a relevant relationship of physical proximity, and is a matter of achieving an embodied reference to God (one which is not mediated simply by experience or description of God).”¹⁵⁰ God, for fandom, is not the actors or writers or producers – they create the story, and they create the characters. Fandom energy is directed towards each other and the story itself – the opportunity to interact with those who create the source material provides proximity to it. Fans share this experience of proximity with those who are present, as well as relaying it to those not present.

CONSUMPTION

With such a myriad of possible activities, fandom has a place for everyone to express themselves. However, approximately two-thirds of fandom participants do not do any of these things.¹⁵¹ Although the majority of users do not create their own original works, they still participate in fandom in possibly the most important way: consumption. Scholar John Storey writes, “Culture is not something already made which we consume; culture is what we *make* in

¹⁴⁹ Thomas A Tweed, “John Wesley Slept Here: American Shrines and American Methodists,” *Numen* 47, no. 2000 (2014), 43.

¹⁵⁰ Wynn, “God, Pilgrimage, and Acknowledgement of Place”, 146.

¹⁵¹ According to survey responses, about 36% of the fandom write fic, 18% draw fanart, 14% make edits, 11% make gifs, 9% roleplay (a subset of fanfiction), 9% write meta, 9% compose music or make fanmixes, and 4% fanvids. However, 92% reblog posts made by other users.

the varied practices of everyday life, including consumption. Consumption involves the *making* of culture; that is why it matters.”¹⁵² By consumption, I mean that they present themselves as an audience for fandom. They *read* the stories, they admire the art, they listen to the fanmixes, and most importantly, they reblog the posts. The act of consumption stands as the common denominator for creators and non-creators alike – it is the minimum requirement for joining a fandom. A fandom does not exist if there are just people creating, there have to be people to appreciate the creations. It cannot just be people pushing creation into the internet; it would lose force and stop. Someone has to pick up the creation and keep pushing the carousel. That is the energy that keeps fandom in motion.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the main practices of the *Supernatural* fandom. In doing so, I have compared them to different forms of mysticism, pilgrimage, etc., examining some of the resonances these practices have with those religious practices in order to understand the devotional nature of fandom. I have been chasing the answers to several implicit questions throughout this section: If fandom has no “god”, or at least a shifting notion of its “god” in light of the mystical model, then what does fandom center around? For some fans, it is the actors; for many others, it is the characters, or the story itself. Fans create and perpetuate a sort of centripetal energy, which swirls around and around itself. This action, completely voluntary and motivated entirely by passion and love for the source material, creates fandom and the community. Fans feed off of the energy and creativity of their peers, and are inspired to continue this motion. This carousel (tornado, even) of energy both represents the fans (people joined by a

¹⁵² John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, 1st ed. (Atlanta, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 132.

common interest) and the works (a body of work inspired by source material created and circulated by fans). The combination of individuals and creations makes up the fandom.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I hope I have thoroughly “demystified” fandom. In the first section, I described the ways the community exists both in its online bounds and as it interacts in the physical world both with each other and the show makers, to various degrees of triumph and defeat. In the second section, I discussed who is drawn to fandom, by what means, and for what purpose. In the final section, I illustrated the various ways fans express themselves through creative works, and how those works help to create the community. In all of this, I have shown the correlations of fandom to mystical practice not so that fandom may be understood as a religious practice, but so that it may be better understood as it relates functionally.

In trying to debunk the myth of fandom as a religion, I have shown that in some sense that fandom does have a “god”, in that it does focus itself semi-centrally around fascination of a certain object: the story of itself. It is important to note, though, the distinction recognized by members of the fandom between how the story is presented to them (as it exists in the canon, a concrete though also developing plot line) and the essence of the story itself (*fanon* – the infinitive universe of combinations and variations of characters, situations and themes). Although this distinction is clear to fans, the fact that it is generally overlooked is often what leads to attempts to discredit the fandom by official creators.

This action, rooted in this fundamental misunderstanding, results as a struggle, which I hope has been implicit in this entire work, over power. The question is of ownership: who does the story truly belong to? Because they have the money, the production team, the weekly national television hour, The Powers That Be believe that they alone have authority over the story. As I hope I have proven, this is simply not the case. Popular culture scholar John Storey outlines Hall’s Theory of television production as having three pieces – encoding, discourse, and

decoding.¹⁵³ Decoding is the meaning derived by the audience, which is not necessarily the same as the meaning encoded by the producers.¹⁵⁴ As Purnima Mankekar writes, “Popular culture is a site of struggle between dominant discourses and forces of resistance.”¹⁵⁵ Further, John Storey asserts that meanings made by consumers are more important than the meanings intended by the creators, because the consumers determine what meanings get included into the culture.¹⁵⁶ These facts make TPTB incredibly uncomfortable, because it means that they have lost some of the authority over the story. The story does not end at the edge of the television screen; it continues on into the hearts and minds of the viewers to be considered, internalized, and changed.

If we turn again to the similar functions of fandom to mysticism, the struggle over power becomes much clearer. Grace Jantzen writes:

“The connection of questions of power to questions of mysticism is obvious as soon as one stops to consider that a person who was acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will. If defining mysticism is a way of defining power, then the question of who counts as a mystic is of immediate political importance.”¹⁵⁷

From the application of this quote, it is clear how the power of fandom threatens the power of executive producers. If fans claim to know the story *better* than The Powers That Be, they might stop watching the show altogether. After all, the show itself is just *one version* of the story.

Christopher Helland writes:

“Religious authority often dictates the symbols that will represent the sacred, how they will be used, who can use them, what benefit people receive from the action, etc. In the new online environment, all of these issues become contentious. Individuals have a great deal of freedom in the online environment to experiment, and even develop their own views regarding the role of the Internet in religious ritual life”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵⁵ Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Post-Colonial India*, 29.

¹⁵⁶ Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, 130.

¹⁵⁷ Jantzen, “Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics”, 186.

¹⁵⁸ Helland, “Ritual”, 31.

In a new, unbridled online context, fans are limited only by their imagination to transform the canon, and *not* limited by the canon or official creators in any way. Pauline Cheong writes, “Authority is performative and discursive, involving persuasive claims by leaders to elicit an audience’s attention, respect, and trust. Religious authority thus can be approached as an order and quality of communication, which in an electron age is media-derived and dynamically constructed.”¹⁵⁹ The failure on the part of The Powers That Be to fundamentally understand fandom results in the undermining of their own authority, because they cannot communicate with us. Especially now that fandom has moved to the online environment, which is nearly entirely text-based, communication is a value held most highly. Stephanie Ebersohl writes, “In the liminal space that conflates subject-object distinctions, the discursive structure follows until it is no longer a question of knowledge equating power. Instead, the power is located in the control of that knowledge and, as both solicitor and receiver of that knowledge, the mystic becomes the active subject that complicates its very production.”¹⁶⁰ Without any sort of supreme authority, fandom has the power to step in and create new aspects of this fictional universe, and we will do with it as we please. As some users have said, this results in a deeper enjoyment of fanon than canon, further removing power from The Powers That Be.

It also cannot be ignored that The Powers That Be are nearly always exclusively white, straight, wealthy males, in clear contrast to the average fan of the show. Don Cuppit writes, “It appears that a certain misogynistic horror of female sexuality has in the past played a very large part in the constitution of religious worlds and the construction of religious systems of thought.”¹⁶¹ A significant portion of the attempt to discredit fandom and its works is framed

¹⁵⁹ Pauline Hope Cheong, “Authority,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 74.

¹⁶⁰ Ebersohl, “Riddling the Subject: Female Mystics, Hysterics’ Faith”, 29.

¹⁶¹ Cuppit, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 84.

around a discourse that suggest being young, female, and passionate are negative qualities, in order to keep them in control. As Stephanie Ebersohl notes, “Women’s narratives work to navigate a cultural environment that often masked behaviors that could be considered disruptive or otherwise problematic for the hegemonic and predominantly patriarchal milieu.”¹⁶² The fandom’s distaste for that discourse is evident in nearly all of our fandom’s works. Although this does not result in more respect for the fandom from The Powers That Be, it at least unites us. Purnima Mankekar writes, “Resistance and compliance are not mutually exclusive categories, and the role of television in the constitution of women’s subjectivities cannot be conceptualized in terms of one or the other.”¹⁶³ This fact is essential in understanding fandom. Yes, to some extent, most activity of fandom is rooted in opposition to the canon – we make changes, we twist things around, we erase what we do not like. However, the love for the story, and by extension the show, cannot be overstated. Fandom and TBTB are forever trapped in a tangled web of creation and contention for as long as the show exists. Until it ends, the two entities will battle for power.

Fanon is the only area where TPTB have absolutely no high ground, and once the show ends, that is exactly where the story lives on. The Powers That Be will always have claim over the story as long as it is on the air, but beyond that, fandom’s power is limitless. Finally, the prize for fans is the community itself. TE Stâncel writes:

“God is objectivized with the word, the word and God become as one... But this objectivation does not equate with a direct transposing but with a ‘filtered one’ through an interface because, as it is written in the Apocalypse, a direct contact with divinity would be deadly... the human being always needs an intermediary element to separate him from all forms and ontological levels and expressions of totalities (purities). Man needs the protective veil of the angels in order to enter in a relation with what was

¹⁶² Ebersohl, “Riddling the Subject: Female Mystics, Hysterics’ Faith”, 21.

¹⁶³ Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Post-Colonial India*, 29.

culturally acknowledged as “God” (maybe the most powerful and intense expression of the sublime).”¹⁶⁴ God here, the story, exists as a loosely bounded essence in the collective imagination of thousands of people. It is that third intermediary element (angels, fandom, what have you) which is essential, and which is closer to subject than god or other humans.¹⁶⁵ What does this mean for fandom? Fans will never be as close to the story as they are to each other, because they only have access to the story *through* each other. Tumblr user fandoms--assemble defined fandom in five words: “Love. Understanding. Friendship. Happiness. Communication.” Fandom may not result in the perfect union of fan and fictional universe, but it does result in a crazy, remarkable community. This community allows for greater connection with the universe of the show and personal fulfillment, enjoyment, and engagement with each other.

¹⁶⁴ Stâncel and Ormeny, “Transdisciplinary Approach of Imagination and Angels - The Transcultural Hidden Third: From Andrei Plesu to Basarab Nicolescu”, 151-152.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 153.

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Ao3 – short for archiveofourown.org, the primary website for posting fanfiction

AU – short for alternate universe; a classification for fanworks meaning they take place in an alternate universe from that of the canon

Audio posts – a form of post of tumblr, for songs or other audio

Blacklist – an individual user's list of subjects that they do not wish to see on their dashboard; posts tagged with the words on the user's blacklist will not appear on their dash

Canon – what actually happens in the show as it airs; a classification for fanworks meaning they take place in the universe of the show

CGI – short for computer-generated images; special effects which make supernatural things possible on television

Chat post – a form of post on tumblr, for transcribing conversation

Codas – short fanfictions which insert or append scenes into an episode

Cosplay – dressing up in a costume based on some aspect of a show, movie, etc.

Dashboard (dash) – an individual's homepage on tumblr; the aggregate posts of all users followed by an individual

Destiel – the ship name for the romantic pairing of Dean and Cas

Edits – any post made in photoshop (or similar program) from a combination of text, images, textures, or colors

Fandom – the collective group of fans surrounding any particular subject

Fanart – any thing made with images or iconography of canon subjects or characters

Fanfiction (fic) – stories based on canon subjects or characters, written by fans and published online for others to read

Fanmixes – mix tapes based on subjects or characters from a show and uploaded with coordinating titles and art

Fanvids – videos made by fans which are made of canon video clips in differing orders, usually set to music to some sort of theme

Fanon – information about the universe of the show that is derived from the canon and imagined by the fans

Gifs (verb form, giffing) – short for the file type Graphic Interchange File; an animated photo made from stills of video

Gifsets – a form of post on tumblr, which consists on one or more complementary gifs

Like – an expression of admiration for a post; results in a numbered not to indicate it was liked and the content of the post being saved to a private likes page

Liveblogging – creating text posts consisting of opinions, quotes, or impressions as an episode airs, reacting in real time

Meta – a form of text post, which analyzes some aspect of a subject

Personal posts – any text post thematically relating to the blogger's personal life

Photosets – a form of post on tumblr, which consists of one or more complementary still images

Posts – a general term for any individual unit of content on tumblr

Quotes – a form of post on tumblr, for single quote posts

Reblog – the linking of posts to one's own blog; results in the display of content of the post on one's blog, a numbered note to indicate it was reblogged, and its appearance on the dashboard of anyone following

Reposting – copy and pasting the work of someone else as if it were one's own, removing credit and recognition (notes) from the original poster

Screen caps – still photos taken from video files

Selfies – a picture taken of oneself by turning the camera around, with no additional photographer; symbolically representative of confidence

Ship (verb form, shipping) – a pairing of characters that could potentially be romantic; wishing two (or more) characters would be in a romantic relationship based on chemistry, aesthetics, or convenience

Slash – an outdated term for shipping, specifically homosexual pairings

The tags (verb form, tagging) – elsewhere known as the hashtag; used to organize and archive posts, as well as comment on content in a nonintrusive way

Text posts – a form of post on tumblr, for writing meta, personal posts, or jokes

TPTB – short for The Powers That Be; vaguely defined not by the individuals who make it up, TPTB is seen as an entity which has the power to make decisions about the show¹⁶⁶

Ts – short for Tumblr Savior, a browser extension which makes the tumblr experience highly customizable

Videos – a form of post on tumblr, for youtube videos or direct uploads

Wank for ts – the appropriate tag for negativity or hate

Wincest – the ship name for the romantic pairing of Sam and Dean

¹⁶⁶ See “The Powers That Be,” *Fanlore.org*, n.d., http://fanlore.org/wiki/The_Powers_That_Be, for a more thorough explanation of this term

Appendix B: Show Summary

The show opens in Kansas, 1983 on the Winchester family – John Winchester, an ex-marine, his wife Mary, their eldest son, Dean, a toddler, and their baby son, Sam. Mary puts Sam to bed, and as she heads down the stairs, hears a noise from the nursery – but she can see John sleeping in front of the TV. She runs back to Sam; John hears a crash, and suddenly Mary is engulfed in flames, bleeding out and pinned to the ceiling. Fast forward twenty two years to 2005, Dean rolls up in his 1967 Chevy Impala and finds Sam at Stanford, and insists he joins him, because their father is missing. When Sam's Stanford girlfriend Jess dies in the same way as their mother, he decides to drop out and go with Dean. For the last two decades, John has been obsessed with hunting the thing that killed his wife – obviously not human – and he trains himself and his sons in the art of killing anything supernatural. Clearly a dangerous job, the first season of show entails Sam and Dean's cross country hunt for their father, killing vampires, ghosts, demons, and monsters on the way.

The rest of the show spirals out of control, as a continual stream of the consequences of the brother's interests in the supernatural. When they find their father, he is hot on the trail of a demon named Azazel. Just as the family is reunited and they're getting close, they get hit by a car. Dean is in critical condition, and John sells his soul to Azazel so Dean will pull through. With their father now dead, Dean and Sam continue the hunt for Azazel, but Sam starts having problems, excessive headaches and psychic visions. They find a bunch of other people with psychic powers and headaches – all with the same birthday as Sam. When they all get transported to the same place, it's revealed that Azazel dripped demon blood into their mouths when they were six months old, giving them their powers. Azazel insists they must fight to the death, and the victor will be his personal agent for the apocalypse. Sam makes it to the final two, and just as Dean shows up to rescue him, Sam is stabbed in the back and dies. Mimicking his father's mistakes, Dean makes a deal with a demon – Sam comes back to life, Dean gets one year to live with him, and then Dean has to go to hell – but he doesn't tell Sam what happened. They catch Azazel trying to open up a gate to hell, letting a whole hoard of demons into the world, and finally, they kill him. When the dust settles, Sam figures out that Dean lied to him, and they spend a year trying to figure out how to get Dean out of his deal, but they ultimately fail. Dean goes to hell.

A year later, Dean crawls out of his grave. An angel named Castiel tells him he was ordered by God to raise him from the dead. While in despair over his brother's death, Sam had begun working with a demon named Ruby, who was training him to use his psychic powers to exorcise demons (who, like angels, must possess a human body to interact on earth), but it comes at a cost – Sam gets addicted to drinking demon blood, which strengthens his powers but weakens his relationship with Dean. The brothers are reunited, and things really start getting bad. A demon named Lilith aims to start the apocalypse as it is written in Revelations by breaking sixty six seals to open the gate to Lucifer's cage. Ruby convinces the brothers that Sam has to use his powers to kill Lilith before she finishes, but doing this breaks the final seal, and Sam sets Lucifer free.

As the relationship between the brothers becomes even tenser, things on the cosmic level are heating up as well. Lucifer is walking around, but he's limited because his vessel is weak. The archangels, who ought to have been a symbol of hope and help, instead have their own motivations – Michael, the greatest of all the archangels, and Lucifer must face off, and that will be the end of the earth – and interfere with Dean and Sam's attempts to stop Lucifer. The angels need consent to enter a vessel's body, which prevents them both from having their epic battle

and from taking their vessels by force. As it turns out, Sam, having the demon blood and being farmed by Azazel, is Lucifer's true vessel. On the other hand, Michael's true vessel is Dean – the Winchesters descend from Cain and Abel, and it seems that brothers are always destined to fight brothers. The will of the archangels and the demons to end the earth with this battle attempts to overcome the Winchester brothers, and even though Dean blames Sam for starting the apocalypse, their love for each other encourages them to try and find any other way to stop it. Castiel sets out to find God and get him to stop everything, but to no avail – God is missing, presumed gone for good. The brothers and Castiel (affectionately called “Team Free Will”) come up with a plan to trap Lucifer, but it depends on Sam saying yes to being possessed. Lucifer takes over his body, but the plan fails. Sam isn't strong enough to fight the possession. With Lucifer now in his true vessel, Michael settles for plan B – Sam and Dean's half-brother, Adam, who also has Cain and Abel's blood and will do in a pinch since Dean is still resistant. Lucifer (in Sam) and Michael (in Adam) meet to fight, and Dean rolls up to fight destiny, even if it kills him. It nearly does. Lucifer starts beating the life out of him, while Dean just takes it, and calls out to Sam. Finally, his brother recognizes him, throws off Lucifer's possession, and holds him under just long enough to trap Lucifer (still in his body) and Michael back in hell. They saved the world, but Sam is dead.

Dean tries to live a normal life, but it just doesn't work out for him, especially after Sam is mysteriously risen from the dead, without his soul. Meanwhile, the cosmos are in chaos – with Lucifer and Michael taken care of, no one is running the show in heaven or hell. A demon named Crowley takes over in hell, and the archangel Raphael takes over in heaven, but Raphael is corrupt. Castiel, easily the most human of all the angels, rises up to overthrow him, but the civil war wages bloodily. Dean tries to get Cas to work with him to fix Sam, but Cas is generally too busy – sneaking around with Crowley, trying to win the war in heaven. Dean fixes Sam on his own, but with his soul back Sam has to deal with the consequences of his soulless immorality. Cas and Crowley have a sort of scheme together, to open purgatory and use the souls in there for power. It backfires immensely; Castiel absorbs the souls in purgatory, but he lets something else out too – Leviathans. The leviathans end up being too much for Castiel's body, and they're let loose into the water supply where they can basically act like the Body Snatchers and try to eat the human race by poisoning corn syrup and making all the humans mindless and lethargic. Dean and Cas stab their leader, Dick Roman, with an ancient weapon and they all end up back in purgatory, saving the world but separating the brothers once again.

In contrast to Dean, Sam does pretty well living the apple pie life – so much so that when Dean finds the gate to the mortal world and reunites with his brother, Sam isn't sure he wants to pick up hunting again. Given the fact that Dean has pretty bad codependency issues and that his best friend Cas is still stuck in purgatory, Dean forces Sam to take shotgun yet again. They find these tablets, written in Enochian (the language of the angels) by Metatron (the scribe of God), which have instructions to seal both hell and heaven. Dean promises that once that's done, Sam can quit hunting. A knight of hell believed to be dead, Abaddon, comes up to fight Crowley for Regent of hell, and she's actually pretty evil whereas Crowley ran it more like a business, so the brothers decide they have to stop her. Cas is expelled out of purgatory, where he had stayed of his own free will to do penance for all the angels his war had killed in heaven, so he agrees to help with the trials, believing it will make up for his actions. Of course, the spells go horribly awry – the hell spell almost kills Sam, and the heaven spells accidentally make all the angels fall out of heaven. All of this was according to Metatron's plan, so he's added to the hit list. Metatron wants to be the new God, and with all the angels running around on earth and still

fighting each other, that probably wouldn't be a great idea. Only one thing can kill Metatron, the first blade – the first weapon ever made, used by Cain to kill Abel – and it's only useful when the holder has the mark of Cain, the first demon. Crowley helps Dean find Cain and get the mark, and after testing the blade's power by killing Abaddon, tries to kill Metatron. Metatron overpowers him, and Dean is killed – however, the blade's power has turned Dean into a demon.

Appendix C: Cast List

Dean Winchester.....	<i>Jensen Ackles</i>
Sam Winchester.....	<i>Jared Padalecki</i>
Castiel.....	<i>Misha Collins</i>
Crowley.....	<i>Mark Sheppard</i>
John Winchester.....	<i>Jeffrey Dean Morgan</i>
Mary Winchester.....	<i>Samantha Smith</i>
Azazel.....	<i>Fredric Lehne</i>
Bobby Singer.....	<i>Jim Beaver</i>
Chuck Shirley.....	<i>Rob Benedict</i>
Becky Rosen.....	<i>Emily Perkins</i>
Jody Mills.....	<i>Kim Rhodes</i>
Charlie Bradbury.....	<i>Felicia Day</i>
Kevin Tran.....	<i>Osric Chau</i>
Michael.....	<i>Matt Cohen</i>
Lucifer.....	<i>Mark Pellegrino</i>
Lilith.....	<i>Katherine Boecher</i>
Adam.....	<i>Jake Abel</i>
Raphael.....	<i>Demore Barnes</i>
Dick Roman.....	<i>James Patrick Stewart</i>
Metatron.....	<i>Curtis Armstrong</i>
Jess.....	<i>Adrianne Palicki</i>
Ruby.....	<i>Genevieve Padalecki, Katie Cassidy</i>
Meg.....	<i>Rachel Miner, Nicki Aycox</i>
Abaddon.....	<i>Alaine Huffman</i>

For a more thorough list of cast and crew, please visit

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/fullcredits?ref=tt_ov_st_sm.

Appendix D: Surveys and Responses

Supernatural Fandom Survey – Multiple Choice Questions and Results

* Required

*Are you under the age of 18? ***Yes**No**If Yes, do you have parental consent to participate? ***View the parental consent form here (LINK)**Yes**I am eighteen or older.**If you are between the ages of seven and fourteen, do you agree to participate? ***View the assent form for ages 7-14 here (LINK)**Yes**I am not in that age group**If you are between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, do you agree to participate? ***View the assent form for ages 15-17 here (LINK)**Yes**I am not in that age group**What is your age? **

<i>17 or younger</i>	<i>3%</i>
<i>18 to 24</i>	<i>67%</i>
<i>25 to 34</i>	<i>23%</i>
<i>35 to 44</i>	<i>6%</i>
<i>45 to 54</i>	<i><1%</i>
<i>55 to 64</i>	<i><1%</i>
<i>65 to 74</i>	<i><1%</i>
<i>75 or older</i>	<i><1%</i>

*What is your gender? **

<i>Female</i>	<i>92%</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>3%</i>
<i>Other:</i> <input type="text"/>	<i>5%</i>

*What is your sexual orientation? **

<i>Interested in the same sex</i>	<i>6%</i>
<i>Interested in the opposite sex</i>	<i>34%</i>
<i>Interested in either sex</i>	<i>42%</i>
<i>Interested in neither sex</i>	<i>8%</i>

Other: 10%

How do you participate in fandom? (Check all that apply) *

<i>Read/review meta</i>	61%
<i>Roleplay</i>	9%
<i>Run a blog that has Supernatural posts</i>	78%
<i>Make fanart</i>	18%
<i>Read/review fanfiction</i>	83%
<i>Write fanfiction</i>	36%
<i>Write meta</i>	9%
<i>Run a blog ONLY about Supernatural</i>	9%
<i>Make gifs</i>	11%
<i>Make edits</i>	14%
<i>Make fanvids</i>	4%
<i>Make songs/fanmixes</i>	9%
Other: <input type="text"/>	

On a scale of 1 to 9, how would you rank... *

See Figure 1 for results

Your interest in the overall plot of the show
Your involvement in the fandom
Your interest in the actors and their personal lives

When did you start watching? *

2005	5%
2006	2%
2007	2%
2008	2%
2009	3%
2010	5%
2011	9%
2012	24%
2013	31%

What is your religious affiliation? *

<i>Christian - Catholic</i>	12%
<i>Christian – Protestant</i>	11%
<i>Agnostic</i>	19%
<i>Mormon</i>	<1%
<i>Buddhist</i>	<1%
<i>Atheist</i>	24%
<i>Muslim</i>	3%

<i>Unsure</i>	7%
<i>Hindu</i>	<1%
<i>Jewish</i>	<1%
<i>Wicca</i>	2%
<i>Other:</i> <input type="text"/>	8%

Have you ever attended a Supernatural convention? *

<i>Yes</i>	12%
<i>No, but I would like to</i>	74%
<i>No, and I have no interest in going</i>	14%

What country do you live in? *

Approximate regional results:

<i>North America</i>	68%
<i>Europe</i>	27%
<i>South America</i>	1.5%
<i>Africa, Middle East</i>	<1%
<i>Asia</i>	1%
<i>Australia</i>	2.5%

Do you consider yourself a feminist? *

<i>Yes</i>	93%
<i>No</i>	4%
<i>I'm unsure what feminism means</i>	3%

Please indicate if you have had personal experience - either you, a friend, or a family member - with any of the following (reminder that all survey responses are anonymous): *

<i>Drug use</i>	33%
<i>Alcohol use</i>	50%
<i>Physical abuse</i>	22%
<i>Depression</i>	77%
<i>Self-harm</i>	51%
<i>Familial dysfunction (more than mild)</i>	29%
<i>I have no experience with any of these</i>	13%

Supernatural Fandom Survey – Free Response Questions

* Required

*Tumblr url **

What is the most important aspect of the fandom to you personally?

Why do you think fandom is important to the people who participate?

Explain to what extent the show has made an impact on your life.

Explain to what extent the fandom has made an impact on your life.

Explain to what extent a specific work within the fandom (art, fic, poem, fanvid, etc.) has made an impact on your life.

Please include information about the work - what kind of work it is and who created it.

Do you think there is a religious aspect to fandom?

Do you think the show or the fandom has affected your own religious beliefs?

Why do you participate in fandom?

Appendix E: Selected Fanart
Christ Iconography:



By clervescent, posted May 15, 2015.

<http://clervescent.tumblr.com/post/85849337218/make-me-choose-sam-in-a-flower-crown-of>



By zipra, posted November 2, 2014.

<http://zipra.tumblr.com/post/101626735790/its-unforgivable-i-stole-and-burnt-your-soul-is>



By abstradreams, posted October 13, 2014.

<http://abstradreams.co.vu/post/99867459781/the-rusty-crown-da-tumblr>



By hellosaidthemoon-isafangirl, posted September 12, 2014.

<http://hellosaidthemoon-isafangirl.tumblr.com/post/97301826199>

Wings:



By wifihunters, posted January 13, 2015.

<http://wifihunters.tumblr.com/post/108046019729>



By brightfallenstars and articles, posted March 4, 2015.

<http://artcicles.tumblr.com/post/112707674904/the-art-brightfallenstars-and-i-did-for>



By sunsetagain, posted November 22, 2014.

<http://sunsetagain.tumblr.com/post/103341894680/seraph-castiel-im-an-angel-with-a-shotgun>



By captainlafitte (then known as padadreams), posted February 22, 2014.

<http://captainlafitte.tumblr.com/post/77466407879/maybe-theres-a-god-above-but-all-ive-ever>



By mybluetieangel, posted January 15, 2015.

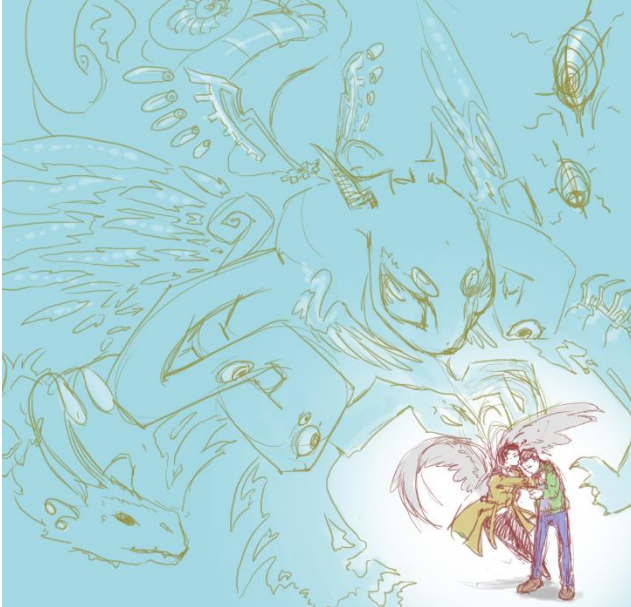
<http://mybluetiedangel.tumblr.com/post/108210425007/too-much-heart-was-always-castiels-Truforms: problem>



By captainlafitte, posted January 20, 2015.

<http://captainlafitte.tumblr.com/post/108690768735/too-much-heart-its-been-a-while-since-ive>

True!form Angels:



By silvermoonphantom, posted June 24, 2013.

<http://silvermoonphantom.tumblr.com/post/53800014364/happy-reminder-that-trueform-castiel-Stigmata: is-beyond>



By alyxrush, posted October 25, 2014.

<http://alyxrush.tumblr.com/post/100937177996/found-a-early-really-wip-of-true-forms>

Stigmata:



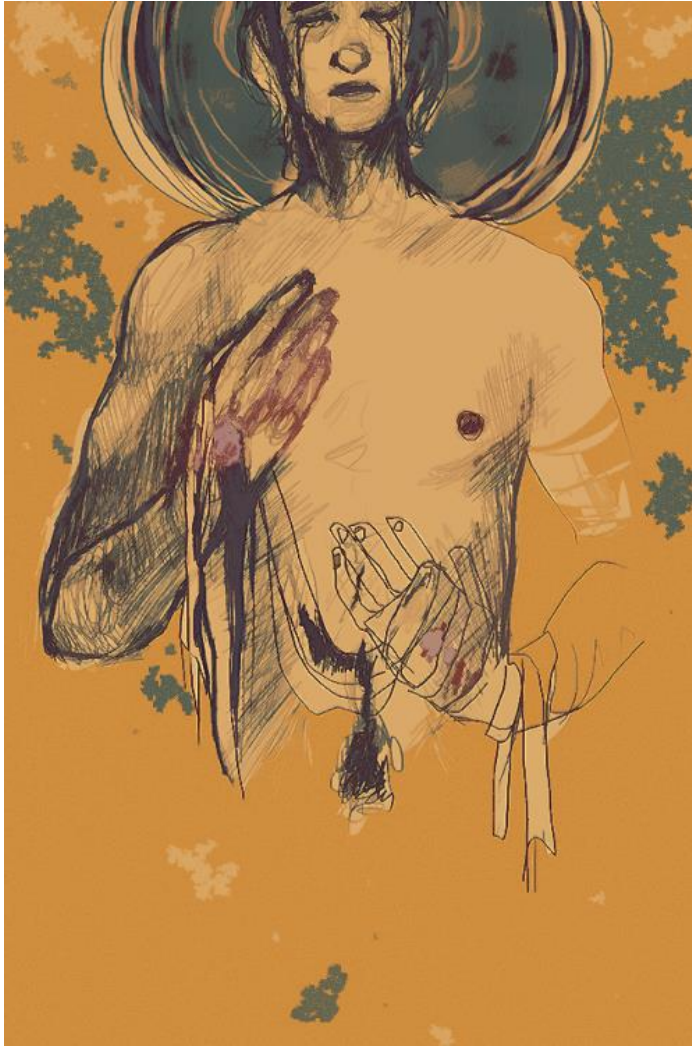
By kikistiel, July 3, 2014.

<http://kikistiel.tumblr.com/post/90702739734/palette-meme-anonymous-requested-sam-winchester>.



By saltandshakendust, posted January 3, 2014.

<http://saltandshakendust.tumblr.com/post/72151192550/after-his-death-he-let-fall-a-shower-of-roses>



By thimblings, posted March 26, 2013.

<http://thimblings.tumblr.com/post/46317228722/someone-is-waiting-to-swallow-all-the-halos-out-of>

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